

04/30/21 Friday

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden: US Military Brass Will Decide Whether to Issue COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate for Troops by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US has reported upwards of 32 million COVID-19 cases and nearly 576,000 deaths, according to figures released by Johns Hopkins University. To date, an estimated 240 million vaccines have been administered, as roughly 102 million Americans have been fully vaccinated.

US President Joe Biden recently commented that the decision to mandate all US troops to vaccinate against SARS-CoV-2, the deadly virus that causes COVID-19, will be left up to military leadership.

Biden declared during a [Friday interview](#) with NBC News' Craig Melvin that while he has not ruled out the possibility of requiring all US soldiers to subject themselves to one of the approved COVID-19 vaccines, it would be a "tough call" to make.

"I don't know. I'm going to leave that to the military," Biden told Melvin after being asked whether a vaccine mandate would be issued for American forces. "I'm not saying I won't. I think you're going to see more and more of them getting it."

"I think it's going to be a tough call as to whether or not they should be required to have to get it in the military, because you're in such close proximity with other military personnel - whether you're in a quarters, where you're all sleeping, or whether you're out in maneuvers," he added. At present, the vaccine is being administered to troops on a voluntary basis since the vaccines are only being dispersed on an emergency use authorization from the US Food and Drug Administration, as opposed to having been granted full approval from the agency.

John Kirby, press secretary for the Pentagon, [confirmed](#) in March that the military brass was weighing whether to make the vaccinations mandatory.

The commander-in-chief's comments came as the US Department of Defense sounded off about troops not wanting to vaccinate themselves against the novel coronavirus. Maj. Gen. Jeff Taliaferro, who serves as the vice director of operations for the Joint Staff, [told lawmakers](#) during a mid-February hearing with the House Armed Services Committee that one-third of soldiers were not interested in the vaccine.

More recently, figures released by the US Marine Corps revealed that nearly 40% of Marines who were offered a COVID-19 vaccine by the Pentagon turned the opportunity down. The Marine Corp Times [reported](#) in mid-April that about 48,000 Marines declined, whereas at least 75,000 service members have had at least a partial dose.

While the Pentagon does not have a system in place to offer exact figures on service members who have opted out of being vaccinated, US Army Lt. Gen. Ronald J. Place, who serves as the director of the Defense Health Agency, [remarked](#) to the press in March that every person within the Defense Department could be vaccinated by early summer, should supply rates stand.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Actor Noel Clarke Denies Sexual Misconduct Allegations But Says He's Seeking 'Professional Help'
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, British actor Noel Clarke was accused of bullying, groping and sexually harassing some 20 women, all of whom worked at various levels within the filmmaking industry. Clarke is a well-known actor, producer, screenwriter and director who is known for a variety of projects, most notably as Mickey Smith in "Doctor Who."

Amid the intensifying backlash that has emerged as a result of the newly surfaced allegations, Clark issued a statement on Friday that included both an apology for his past behaviors and a denial that he ever engaged in criminal acts.

Clarke relayed in a [statement](#) released through the Press Association news agency that he "vehemently" denied the allegations outlined in a [recent investigation](#) by The Guardian, sternly rejecting claims that he had committed "any sexual misconduct or criminal wrongdoing."

"Recent reports, however, have made it clear to me that some of my actions have affected people in ways I did not intend or realise," the release reads. "To those individuals, I am deeply sorry."

He further noted that he "will be seeking professional help to educate myself and change for the better."

Clarke's Friday statement was his second on the developments.

"In a 20-year career, I have put inclusivity and diversity at the forefront of my work and never had a complaint made against me," the actor wrote in its initial response, before denying the claims and stating that he would be defending himself "against these false allegations."

"If anyone who has worked with me has ever felt uncomfortable or disrespected, I sincerely apologise."

Clarke's latest remarks came moments after several industry companies have cut ties with him. Earlier, British television network ITV [announced](#) it would not be airing the final episode of his police drama "Viewpoint," informing viewers they would instead be allowed to catch the conclusion of the limited series on their on-demand site ITV Hub.

As ITV jumped ship on its partnership with Clarke, fellow broadcaster Sky announced it too would be pausing its work with the actor. Sky had been airing Clarke's police series "Bulletproof" and was working on the show's fourth season. The show was also pulled from the US' CW Network lineup.

The British Academy Film Awards, which has been wrapped up within the Clarke scandal after having awarded the actor an Outstanding Contribution award despite having received information about the allegations prior, has also suspended him from both the academy and his award.

Additionally, Clarke has been dropped by the CAA and managers Industry Entertainment and 42, according to [Deadline](#). All3Media, which backs Clarke's Unstoppable Film and Television

production company, is also conducting its own investigation into the allegations, the firm [revealed](#) to Variety.

In a 29-page letter sent to The Guardian via Clarke's lawyers, the actor provided a rebuttal for every allegation made in the investigative report except for one, which involved former "Brotherhood" colleague Helen Atherton.

At the time, Atherton reported to her superiors that Clarke had made inappropriate remarks about her buttocks on multiple occasions. Clarke acknowledged the incidents in the letter and indicated that he was "embarrassed" by his behavior during shooting.

Other allegations mentioned in The Guardian's exposé detail instances in which Clarke pressured actors to do fully nude scenes, exhibited sexually suggestive behavior and bullied supervisors on set, among others.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

'Predatory, Anti-Competitive': Roku Pulls YouTube TV From Platform Amid Row With Google by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this week, Roku Inc. warned that customers may lose access to YouTube TV because Google - the parent company of the virtual cable service - "is attempting to use its YouTube monopoly position to force Roku into accepting predatory, anti-competitive and discriminatory terms."

Roku announced on Friday that, due to the expiration of its carrying contract with Google, YouTube TV was pulled from the Roku Channel Store.

"We are disappointed that Google has allowed our agreement for the distribution of YouTube TV to expire. Roku has not asked for one dollar of additional financial consideration from Google to renew YouTube TV," the company said.

The YouTube TV application, which is separate from the regular YouTube app, offers live TV, on-demand video and a cloud-based DVR for \$65 per month. More than 85 television networks are available on the service.

Up until Friday, Roku's platform had offered the YouTube TV app to customers since [February 2018](#).

Roku highlighted that existing subscribers will continue to have access to YouTube TV via the platform, "unless Google takes actions that require the full removal of the channel."

No new subscriptions to YouTube TV will be possible until a new agreement is reached.

The removal comes just four days after the platform claimed Google was engaging in "predatory, anti-competitive and discriminatory terms" that would lead to manipulated consumer search results and inflated Roku hardware prices.

Furthermore, Roku claimed Google's proposed agreement would "violate established industry data practices."

Google subsidiary YouTube issued a [same-day response](#) to Roku's decision, arguing on Friday that their issue with YouTube TV negotiations related to Roku's attempt to "renegotiate a separate deal encompassing the YouTube main app, which does not expire until December."

YouTube alleged that Roku's "requested exceptions" for its regular YouTube app would resultantly "break the YouTube experience" and impede YouTube's ability to update the platform.

"For example, by not supporting open-source video codecs, you wouldn't be able to watch YouTube in 4K HDR or 8K even if you bought a Roku device that supports that resolution," the Google-owned company claimed.

YouTube also urged Roku to continue to offer its YouTube TV app to existing subscribers, as the platform has agreed to do.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Israeli Protesters Boo, Throw Bottles at Netanyahu During Speech at Deadly Stampede Site
by [Evan Craighead](#)

At least 45 people died, and some 150 individuals were injured early Friday morning after a section of stadium seating in Mount Meron collapsed, triggering a stampede. Several of the deceased were trampled to death as the tens of thousands of people celebrating Lag BaOmer attempted to flee the venue.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a trip to Meron hours after the deadly incident occurred, only to be met with crowds of protesters - many of whom were related to the victims - who reportedly booed and threw bottles at him.

"In these moments our people unite and that is what we are doing at this moment as well," said Netanyahu, announcing that Sunday would be a national day of remembrance for the victims. He also announced that a probe has been launched into what he believes is one of the "heaviest disasters" in Israeli history.

It's unclear if foul play occurred.

Furthermore, Israeli Health Minister Yuli Edelstein has urged the public to let the investigation take place before rushing to place blame.

It's unclear exactly how many people were in attendance for the religious celebration, which has been dubbed the largest Israeli event since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Authorities reportedly expected 10,000 individuals to be in attendance, but organizers [have said](#) some 30,000 individuals showed up.

Some 5,000 police officers were deployed for the celebration.

A police spokesperson told Reuters that the crowd size was similar to that of previous years. However, COVID-19 precautions this year forced organizers to close off bonfire areas at the venue, which may have caused the bottlenecking in foot traffic during the deadly stampede.

US President Joe Biden told his Israeli counterpart in a Friday phone call that the US "stand with the people of Israel, and with Jewish communities the world over, in mourning the terrible tragedy at Mount Meron," according to a White House [statement](#).

"The loss of life among worshipers practicing their faith is heartbreaking," the statement read, noting US personnel have been instructed to offer assistance to the Israeli government.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

TikTok Appoints ByteDance CFO to Concurrently Serve as Video-Sharing Platform's CEO
by [Evan Craighead](#)

TikTok (or Douyin in China), a subsidiary of ByteDance Ltd., has been without a permanent chief executive officer (CEO) since the abrupt resignation of Kevin Mayer - who also served as chief operating officer (COO) of ByteDance. Until recently, former Alphabet executive Vanessa Pappas served as interim CEO for the company.

Shouzi Chew, the recently-appointed chief financial officer (CFO) of ByteDance, will concurrently serve as the new TikTok CEO and ByteDance CEO, TikTok announced in a Friday news release.

Additionally, Pappas will remain at TikTok, and has formally accepted the role of COO.

While Shouzi just joined Bytedance this year, Yiming Zhang, founder and CEO of ByteDance, argued that he has been a key player in the company's success over the years.

"The leadership team of Shou and Vanessa sets the stage for sustained growth," Yiming said in a quoted statement.

"Shou brings deep knowledge of the company and industry, having led a team that was among our earliest investors, and having worked in the technology sector for a decade. He will add depth to the team, focusing on areas including corporate governance and long-term business initiatives."

Prior to joining ByteDance and TikTok, Shouzi served as an executive at Xiaomi, a multinational electronics company that both makes and invests in smartphones and other devices.

Responding to the news, Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO) took to Twitter on Friday and argued that the new appointment occurred because the current administration did not continue previous efforts to have a US-based company take over TikTok's US operations.

Many Republicans, including former US President Donald Trump, have argued that Chinese-owned TikTok poses a potential national security risk due to its collection of American users' data.

Nevertheless, back in February, Biden's administration moved to temporarily halt litigation related to the potential banning of TikTok.

"We plan to develop a comprehensive approach to securing U.S. data that addresses the full range of threats we face," National Security Council spokesperson Emily [Horne said](#) at the time.

"This includes the risk posed by Chinese apps and other software that operate in the U.S. In the coming months, we expect to review specific cases in light of a comprehensive understanding of the risks we face."

However, the lack of new developments has led some - like Hawley - to believe the Biden administration has abandoned the previous administration's push.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Walmart Slams Kanye West Over 'Yeezy' Brand Logo, Deems Design 'Confusingly Similar'
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

An asterisk pinpoints an area that needs to be fixed or readjusted. To use an asterisk within a business brand is to openly admit to consumers that somewhere within the framework of your marketing technique, there are flaws, which is why most companies have a list of terms and conditions.

Walmart Apollo LLC has filed a notice of opposition against famed artist Kanye West's Yeezy LLC in an attempt to challenge West's proposed logo for his apparel brand, saying that the symbol being used is too similar to the design used to represent the retailer's brand.

According to [NBC News](#), Walmart attorney Erica Goven, wrote a letter to West's representatives earlier this month, stating that the retail giant "believes the logo design depicted in the Yeezy Application is confusingly similar to Walmart's well-known spark logo design." Goven goes on to say that the company is open to negotiating with Yeezy LLC on the usage of the logo.

The notice of the opposition, which was [filed](#) with the US Trademark Trial and Appeal Board on April 21, claims that the Walmart logo "will be damaged by registration of [Yeezy LLC's] mark," due to the similarities. The retailer, which represents the second-largest e-commerce market in the US, has claimed that in addition to the logo being well-established, the design also represents the "goodwill" of the company.

In [2005](#), Walmart lost a legal battle against grunge band Nirvana and fashion designer Marc Jacobs over usage of the trademark yellow smiley face that it had often used to sell its incredibly low prices. In [2008](#), Walmart stated that it would be updating its brand which has evolved multiple times over the years.

"For the past two years, a customer-focused transformation has been taking place in Walmart's US business. Walmart's US locations will update store logos as part of an ongoing evolution of its overall brand – customers have already seen this in refreshed store signage and recent print advertisements and TV commercials. But what really matters is what happens out there in the stores. This update to the logo is simply a reflection of the refresh taking place inside our stores and our renewed sense of purpose to help people save money so they can live better," Walmart wrote in the release.

West [submitted](#) his application to trademark the Yeezy symbol based on use in commerce under Under Code Title 15 ([15 U.S.C. § 1051](#)). The application was filed on January 3, 2020, and is now working its way through the US Patent and Trademark Office. In the application, the symbol is described as an "eight dotted lines, each comprising three totally shaded circles, with a total of 24 circles, arranged at equal angles as rays from a sun."

West has been making a lot of moves this month: Tuesday featured the sale of his new Yeezy Slides, which all sold out quickly. A prototype of the Nike shoes West wore during the Grammy Awards in 2008 for his "Hey Mama" and "Stronger" performances also sold for \$1.8 million in a private sale earlier this week.

The application the Yeezy brand submitted states it intends to use the mark for several different things from clothing, music and cybersecurity to the construction of "modular homes."

Walmart has also filed notice of opposition against various other companies this week, including Hefei Sanxia Import and Export Trade Co. Ltd., Globetide Inc. and Liberty Procurement Co, Inc.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Tributes Pour in After Unexpected Death of South African Zulu Nation Queen Mantfombi
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

When the patriarch of the family passes, it is often met with family tensions that inevitably emerge. After the passing of Goodwill Zwelithini ka Bhekuzulu, the eighth monarch of the Zulu Kingdom earlier this month, many questions have surfaced as to who may take up the throne. Queen Shiyiwe Mantfombi Dlamini Zulu, daughter of late King Mswati II, died Friday at the age of 65. She had been appointed interim ruler of the Zulu nation on March 21 amid pending discussions about who would serve as the next king.

It was believed that the queen's first born son, Prince Misuzulu Zulu, would become the next in line for the throne.

"It is with deepest shock and distress that the royal family announces the unexpected passing of her Majesty Queen Shiyiwe Mantfombi Dlamini Zulu, regent of the Zulu nation," said a statement issued by Prince Mongosutho Buthelezi.

"This has taken us by surprise and left us utterly bereft. It is true that the Lord alone knows the days that He has allotted to each one of us."

It was reported that the queen had taken ill recently and was admitted to the hospital. In the wake of the death announcement, many tributes have started to come in from surrounding nations.

Queen Mantfombi married King Zwelithini in 1977, effectively becoming his third wife. It was reported the king's will established that his successor would come from the house of Queen Mantofombi, who is also the Sister of King Mswati III of eSwatini - ruler of the country formerly known as Swaziland. Following the death of King Zwelithini, the queen was established as the regent queen but postponed the decision for three months out of respect for her deceased husband.

The expected king, Prince MisuZulu, was born in Kwahlabisa, KwaZulu-Natal, in September 1974 and studied in the US. The prince is one of 28 children, eight of whom came from the partnership between the king and Queen Montfambi.

"She has eight princes but as per Zulu culture the first one who is MisuZulu will be the next king, that [sic] why king Zwelithini appointed her to be interim while she is preparing her son," Prince Mongosutho Buthelezi announced in the [statement](#) released on March 21 about succession matters.

According to reports, Prince Mongusuthu Buthlezi of the Buthelezi clan near Vryheid was not present when the will was read. The king's sister, Princess Thembi Ndlovu, has said "only God knows" who will succeed the king.

King Zwelithini had a total of six wives. According to Dr Bhedlindaba Mkhize from the Umsamo Institute, all of the queens have the responsibility to guide the late king's successor, as well as welcome the new queens to the royal household.

Prince Mongosuthu Buthelezi had suspected division within the royal family after revealing that the late King Goodwill Zwelithini's siblings had been conducting meetings without the authority

or sanction of the regent. He [dismissed](#) rumors that the queen had been poisoned and promised an update after the mourning period.

King Zwelithini ruled the Zulu nation under the traditional leadership clause of South Africa's republican constitution, with family links to the Swazi and Xhosa nations. He was buried in a private ukutshalwa ceremony in his Kwadlamahlahla Royal Palace in Kwanongoma on March 24. The cause of Queen Mamfondti's death is still under investigation, and the royal family has asked for privacy as they prepare her funeral.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Moroccan Foreign Minister to Court AIPAC as Biden Reportedly Sticks by Trump Deal on Western Sahara
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Saharawi Polisario Front fought a 16-year war against Morocco and Mauritania for an independent Western Sahara, which ended in a UN-brokered peace and a promise of an independence referendum that hasn't come. Until recently the US supported it, but has now prioritized shoring up international support for Israel.

The Biden administration won't be changing course on former US President Donald Trump's December 2020 decision to recognize Morocco's claims of sovereignty over Western Sahara. The news comes amid reports Morocco's chief diplomat plans to attend a conference hosted by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Israel's largest lobby in the US. Sources familiar with a Friday phone call between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita [told Axios](#) that while a State Department readout of the call doesn't mention Western Sahara, the two discussed the topic and Blinken said the administration wasn't looking to change existing US policy on it at the moment. The closest thing [mentioned in the readout](#) says Blinken "welcomed Morocco's steps to improve relations with Israel and noted the Morocco-Israel relationship will bring long-term benefits for both countries."

Bourita to Court Israeli Lobby

The news comes amid reports that Bourita is attending a May 6 event hosted by the AIPAC in what is likely an attempt to further shore up support from the Biden administration after an ambiguous move by Washington at a recent United Nations meeting on Western Sahara. According to [Morocco World News](#), AIPAC has invited Bourita to be a "distinguished guest" at the May 6 Mid-Atlantic Spring Program, which is being held online in lieu of its annual Washington, DC, conference that was cancelled in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is the first time a Moroccan senior official has attended as a guest of honor.

The event will reportedly be attended by a number of prominent US and Israeli figures, including Israeli infrastructure minister Yuval Steinitz; the Israeli Defense Ministry's politico-military affairs director, Zohar Palti; and Binyamin Zomer, Director of Corporate Affairs at Noble Energy, who was previously [AIPAC's deputy director](#) of policy and government affairs.

Morocco agreed to [normalize and formalize](#) its relations with Israel in December 2020 as part of an agreement with the Trump administration that included Washington recognizing Rabat's claims of sovereignty over Western Sahara. Morocco has occupied the non-self-governing territory since 1975, although a 1991 peace deal with the indigenous Saharawi liberation front Polisario promised an independence referendum overseen by the United Nations.

That peace agreement collapsed in November 2020 after Moroccan police forcibly dispersed a Saharawi sit-in protest in Guerguerat, a southern border crossing between Western Sahara and Mauritania. In 1976, a Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic was declared in the territory, but due to huge sand berms built by Morocco to divide the territory, the SADR only exercises authority east of the wall; in the west along the Atlantic coast, Moroccan rule holds sway and most the country's urban areas and industries are located.

A Deal Nobody Likes

As early as late December, weeks before Biden took office, [Rabat was already lobbying](#) the incoming administration, with Jerusalem just as nervous that if Biden did so, Israel's deal with Morocco could fall apart as well. The two states have signed economic agreements and established direct flights that will begin after the end of Ramadan, and the US has opened [its own consulate](#) in the Western Saharan capital of Laayoune.

However, Trump's decision was highly [unpopular among senior](#) US diplomats and lawmakers, who highlighted Washington's long-standing support for the UN peacekeeping mission MINURSO and an equitable solution for the Saharawis, urging Biden to unring the recognition bell.

A [Saharawi diplomat told Sputnik](#) at the time of the deal that it would only embolden Moroccan repression of the Saharawis, which would cause their militant struggle to deepen.

"We thought that with our good behavior, that they were going to reward us with our right of self-determination. Now, we can see that we were very naive," said Omeima Abdeslam, the Polisario representative to Switzerland.

"The Trump move will not affect the Saharawi resistance and struggle for their independence," she said. "[On] the contrary, the move of Trump has [made] the Saharawis more united and more persistent to get their independence by all means, including the armed struggle ... and will not end until total independence."

The decision was far from popular in Morocco either, where support for the Palestinian struggle remains high. When the deal was announced, Prime Minister Saad Eddine El Othmani, who heads the conservative Justice and Development Party, [tried to distance himself](#) from it, saying it was a decision by King Mohamed VI and asserting that the move in no way means support for Trump's so-called "Deal of the Century." Other Arab nations, including the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, agreed to their own recognition of Israel as part of a US-brokered deal that halted Jerusalem's planned annexation of large parts of the West Bank.

After those two nations penned their deals with Israel in September, one of Othmani's advisers [told Israel Hayom](#) a similar deal would be impossible without US recognition of Morocco's claims over Western Sahara. According to [Middle East Monitor](#), if Biden were to undo Trump's move, Morocco would likely withdraw from its agreement with Israel, or at least decline to expand their ties further.

Ambiguous Move at UN

Last week was the UN Security Council's first [meeting on Western Sahara](#) since the outbreak of war and the US-Morocco-Israel deal, and both Saharawis and Moroccans expected the body to act in their favor. Instead, the meeting produced little more than an agreement that a new UN envoy must be appointed in order to facilitate negotiations between the two sides.

At the meeting, the US presented a document calling for the two sides to adopt a "constructive" attitude toward MINURSO and to "avoid escalation." On the one hand, this was not the repudiation of Trump's move the Saharawis wanted, but it also wasn't a firm statement of support for Morocco, either, leaving the issue open to interpretation until Friday's phone call.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Flew 65 Spy Plane Sorties Over South China Sea in April, Up 40% in 2021, Report Says by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Biden administration has postured against China's alleged aggression, but as Beijing representatives have pointed out, it's the US that is increasing military activity off China's shores and drilling for assault operations, not the other way around.

The US flew 65 spy plane missions across the South China Sea in April, according to data compiled by the South China Sea Probing Initiative (SCSPI) think tank published on Friday.

"Though static with those in the first quarter of 2021, the intensity of aerial reconnaissance activities has increased by more than 40% compared with the same period in 2020, since Biden took office," SCSPI wrote, [citing Thursday comments](#) by the Chinese Ministry of National Defense about increased US activities in the area.

According to the report, the US flew five types of reconnaissance aircraft across the area, reflecting a wide interest in everything from maritime patrol to signals intelligence and battlefield construction.

P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft flew the vast majority, with 43 missions in April, while another similar aircraft, the E-8C Orion, also flew five missions. Both aircraft can track surface ships as well as search for submarines using magnetic anomaly detectors. There were also 10 missions flown by EP-3E Aries II signals intelligence aircraft and six missions by RC-135W Rivet Joints, another SIGINT aircraft.

SCSPI also tracked five missions flown by the E-8C Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (Joint STARS), a powerful intelligence-gathering aircraft that carries a ground moving target indicator able to track dozens of ground units as well as a synthetic aperture radar capable of taking highly detailed images of the ground for hundreds of kilometers in every direction. A single MQ-4C Triton unmanned aerial vehicle also flew across the South China Sea in April.

Notable for their absence were the privately-operated [reconnaissance aircraft](#) flown by defense contractors that Sputnik has previously reported were in use off the coast of China. The remaining Bombardier CL-604 flown by Tenax Aerospace Corporation departed in mid-March, its year-long contract having apparently expired. [SCSPI noted](#) at the time it had flown 250 missions from Kadena Air Force Base on Okinawa.

Other spy planes continue to operate in the vicinity of China as well: A [U-2 Dragon Lady](#) high altitude spy plane was tracked flying across the East China Sea on Thursday from the USAF's Osan Air Force Base in South Korea.

While SCSPi has not published data on March flights, February was [the busiest month](#) the Peking University think tank had ever tracked, with 75 flights during the year's shortest month. In turn, [2020 was also](#) the busiest of recent years for US spy planes over the South China Sea, as well.

These flights have taken place in the context of military drills by a US [carrier strike group](#) and an amphibious ready group, together sporting more than 100 aircraft and thousands of US Marines, in the South China Sea. Both of China's carriers also later visited the sea after conducting their own drills in the Philippine Sea, which were interrupted by [close-sailing US warships](#).

On Thursday, Chinese defense ministry spokesperson [Senior Col. Wu Qian said](#) that since US President Joe Biden took office on January 20, US reconnaissance flights around China have increased by 40% and US warships had been 20% more active than during the same period last year.

"The US frequently sends ships and aircraft to conduct activities in waters and airspace around China, escalating regional militarization and threatening regional peace and stability," Wu told reporters. "China is firmly opposed to that. We urge the US side to strictly restrain its troops on the ground, abide by the 'Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters between China and the US' and 'International Maritime Collision Prevention Regulations,' so as to prevent the recurrence of similar dangerous incidents."

The US claims [China's maritime claims](#) in the South China Sea are illegal and it has postured itself as standing up for the rights of the region's other nations, as well as defending international law. However, China is in its [own lengthy negotiations](#) with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to draw up a mutually agreed Code of Conduct for the South China Sea, and the US itself has [never actually ratified](#) the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea that it claims to be enforcing.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Ukraine Can Work to Meet Standards to Become NATO Member, State Dept Says
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Recent weeks have seen a tense standoff as Russian troops moved south for readiness drills and Kiev and Washington declared a Russian invasion of Ukraine was imminent. Earlier this year, Kiev laid out plans to retake the Crimea, which voted to rejoin Russia in 2014 following a US-backed right-wing nationalist coup in Kiev.

"I think you are very aware that the Biden administration remains committed to ensuring that NATO's door remains open to aspirants when they are ready and able to meet commitments and obligations. We are committed certainly to ensuring that the country like Ukraine can work

to meet those standards," Acting US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Philip Reeker told reporters Friday.

His words come just days before US Secretary of State [Antony Blinken is scheduled](#) to visit Ukraine and a few weeks after Blinken met with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in Brussels. After that meeting, [Kuleba said](#) the US "stands firmly behind the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Ukraine," adding that he and Blinken had "agreed to raise the level of ambition and begin a new day in our relations."

In June 2020, the [NATO alliance recognized](#) Ukraine as an "enhanced opportunities partner," a change the alliance said "aims to maintain and deepen cooperation between Allies and partners that have made significant contributions to NATO-led operations and missions."

"As a NATO partner, Ukraine has provided troops to Allied operations, including in Afghanistan and Kosovo, as well as to the NATO Response Force and NATO exercises. Allies highly value these significant contributions, which demonstrate Ukraine's commitment to Euro-Atlantic security," the release stated. "As an Enhanced Opportunities Partner, Ukraine will benefit from tailor-made opportunities to help sustain such contributions. This includes enhanced access to interoperability programs and exercises, and more sharing of information, including lessons learned."

However, it also noted that the change "does not prejudice any decisions on NATO membership." Other NATO enhanced opportunities partners include Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan and Sweden.

[According to NATO](#), the terms for joining the mutual defense alliance include "a functioning democratic political system based on a market economy; fair treatment of minority populations; a commitment to resolve conflicts peacefully; an ability and willingness to make a military contribution to NATO operations; and a commitment to democratic civil-military relations and institutions."

Nationalist Government Wins US Support

Tensions have been high between Ukraine and Russia since February 2014, when a US-backed coup forced then-Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich from power and ushered in a right-wing nationalist government bent on reducing the status of the country's large Russian-speaking minority.

The incident prompted Russian-speaking Crimea to secede from Ukraine and vote in a referendum to rejoin Russia, while several Russian-majority cities in the Donetsk River basin in eastern Ukraine rose in rebellion against Kiev. The war that has raged ever since has claimed [more than 13,000 lives](#). Kiev and Washington have claimed Russia is arming the autonomous rebels but Moscow has consistently denied it is a party to the conflict.

Western nations have [refused to recognize](#) Crimea's referendum on rejoining Russia, declaring it to be an "illegal annexation" and holding the move up as proof of Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggressive and expansionist intentions. NATO subsequently began an Enhanced Forward Presence deployment of four battalion battle groups to four countries on Russia's western border: Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and new military installations have been [built in Romania](#).

Meanwhile, the US has [grown increasingly close](#) to the Ukrainian government, providing them with arms and diplomatic support.

Amid the most recent tense moment, as Russian forces [conducted awareness drills](#) in the country's south and west several weeks ago, Ukrainian President [Volodymyr Zelenskyy](#) [remarked](#) that Ukraine joining NATO was "the only way to end the war in Donbas. The MAP [membership action plan for joining NATO] will be a real signal for Russia."

In response, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman [Maria Zakharova](#) [noted](#) that "hypothetical membership in the alliance would, contrary to Kiev's expectations, not bring peace to Ukraine but would result in a large-scale escalation in its southeast and may lead to irreversible consequences for Ukrainian statehood."

In March, the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine approved, and Ukrainian President Voldymyr Zelenskyy subsequently put into effect, a "[Strategy for Deoccupation and Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol](#)." The document blames the Yanukovych government for "treason" by signing the Kharkov Pact in 2010, allowing Russia to lease the naval base at Sevastopol until 2042 and for Russia to potentially provide Ukraine with discounted natural gas. The document further calls on the 236 lawmakers who voted to pass the pact be charged with treason.

NATO Expands Eastward Against Promises

NATO was formed in 1949 by several Western powers amid fears that communist parties with rising popularity could come to power in Europe and invite the Soviet Union's Red Army into them, as Czechoslovakia had the year prior. A few years later in 1955, the Soviet Union and the socialist nations of the Eastern Bloc signed their own collective defense agreement, known as the Warsaw Pact.

After the end of socialism in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Warsaw Pact was dissolved. However, while then-US Secretary of State James Baker gave Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev a verbal promise that NATO would expand "[not one inch eastward](#)" after the end of the Warsaw Pact, it has subsequently done just that, incorporating a number of former Soviet allies and even former Soviet republics that broke away as the USSR dissolved in 1991.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

'Just Like We Did in Syria': Turkey to Build New Base in Iraqi Kurdistan Amid Anti-PKK Offensive
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Roughly 30 million Kurdish people are scattered across four countries. An agreement at the end of World War I foresaw a Kurdish state established out of territories of the former Ottoman Empire, but instead the land was divided between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

Turkey announced on Friday the establishment of a new military base in Iraqi Kurdistan to interrupt the movement of Kurdish fighters in the area. The move comes days after Ankara launched a new combined arms offensive in the region targeting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Turkish Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu told a closed meeting of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) on Friday that the latest Kurdistan offensive would continue and Turkey's gains would be solidified by building a new base at Metina, "just like we did in Syria." "This region is a route to Qandil and we will control this line," Soylu said, [according to Türkiye](#). Qandil is the headquarters of the PKK, militancy, which seeks to create a Kurdish state in parts of Turkey and Iraq, and is considered to be a terror group by Ankara. The group's armed branch is the People's Defense Forces.

[According to Rudaw](#), a news outlet based in the Iraqi Kurdistan capital of Erbil, Metine is of strategic importance for the PKK and a Turkish base in the area will be able to effectively control the militant group's movements between Qandil, Syria, Iraqi Kurdistan and southeastern Turkey. A week ago, Turkish Defense Minister [Hulusi Akar announced](#) new air and ground offensives in northern Iraq against the PKK. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said the operations aim "to completely end the presence of the terror threat ... along our southern borders." "There's no room for the separatist terror group in the future of Turkey, Iraq or Syria," [he said of the PKK](#). "We will keep on fighting until we eradicate these gangs of murderers, who cause nothing but tears and destruction."

Turkey has long sought to destroy the PKK and other Kurdish militant groups, having [launched another operation](#) into northern Iraq in June 2020 and established [four new bases](#) in Kurdistan in September.

An unnamed PKK source [told Al-Monitor](#) that the group was facing more pressure than ever before because Turkey has deployed armed drones and denied them use of regular roads, forcing them to use mountain trails. However, the outlet reported the Kurdish militants have not claimed any casualties as of yet, while Turkey has lost two soldiers in the operation.

Soylu never expanded on his comparison of the situation to Syria, where Turkey occupies two separate parts of the country: one area in the west around Idlib, where Turkish forces [support Islamist rebels](#) against the Syrian government, and another strip along the border in the east that Ankara [invaded in October 2019](#) and evicted the Kurdish population from.

The Turkish government has been fighting the PKK since the early 1980s. The PKK and Turkey signed a ceasefire agreement in 2013, but it collapsed just two years later over several terror attacks reportedly committed by PKK militants.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Activists Proclaim May 2 to Be International Day of Solidarity With Odessa

WASHINGTON, April, 30 (Sputnik) - A group of US activists has proclaimed May 2 to be an International Day of Solidarity with Odessa and is calling on anti-fascist organizations around the world to commemorate the massacre of dozens of people that took place in this Ukrainian city in 2014, the United States-based Odessa Solidarity Campaign coordinator Phil Wilayto told Sputnik.

"The Odessa Solidarity Campaign, along with many other organizations, have called for an 'International Day of Solidarity with Odessa and Anti-Fascists in Ukraine.' We are asking

anti-fascist organizations everywhere to hold events in their city to commemorate the 7th anniversary of the Odessa massacre and also to call for an international investigation of that atrocity, something the Ukrainian government has never agreed to," Wilayto said.

On May 2, 2014, Ukrainian national-chauvinists locked protesters in Odessa's House of Trade Unions and set the building on fire. Almost 50 people died and some 250 protesters were injured in clashes with the radicals, according to the United Nations.

COMMEMORATIVE EVENTS IN US, EUROPE

The Odessa Solidarity Campaign plans to hold a vigil on Sunday in the city of Richmond, Virginia, outside of the federal courthouse.

The organizers said they are appealing to all progressive organizations everywhere to hold similar events on May 2 and to raise concerns about human rights in Ukraine. They have issued a statement urging the United States and other Western countries to stop supporting neo-Nazi groups in Ukraine and cease military support for the Ukrainian government in its conflict in Donbass.

They also called for an independent international investigation of the Odessa massacre of May 2.

"We are also asking organizations and individuals to endorse an International Solidarity Statement that we and other organizations are promoting," Wilayto said.

Similar event will take place in different parts of the world, including Odessa, the Lugansk Peoples' Republic, Berlin, Budapest, New York City and in the Italian city of Cheriano Laghetto, the organizers said.

A vigil is scheduled in Moscow on May 3, they added.

UKRAINE BLOCKS INVESTIGATION INTO MASSACRE

Wilayto accuses the Ukrainian authorities of blocking an independent investigation into the Odessa massacre.

"The post-coup Ukrainian government continues to prevent international organizations from conducting independent, objective investigations," he said.

At the time of the massacre, the police did not intervene to prevent the crime and the scene was never secured for an investigation, Wilayto said.

"All of this points to the complicity of the government in the massacre, which we believe was meant to send a message to all coup opponents that any resistance would be met with severe repression. For this, more than 40 people died," Wilayto added.

WORLD WILL BE OUTRAGED BY REALITY IN UKRAINE

Wilayto condemned the Ukrainian authorities for their acceptance of neo-Nazi groups in the country.

"Their marches take place on a regular basis in Ukraine. I saw one myself when I attended the second annual memorial in Odessa for the victims of the massacre," he said, commenting on the recent rally in Kiev in commemoration of the anniversary of the foundation of the SS Galicia Division during World War II. In the past, such neo-Nazi parades were held in the city of Lviv. Wilayto accused nationalists organizations like the Right Sector and the Svoboda Party of participating in illegal activities and suppressing the opposition, effectively leading to the conflict in Donbas and the return of Crimea to Russia.

"I believe the world would be outraged if it knew the reality of today's Ukraine," he said.

The SS Division Galicia - a military unit that included more than 80,000 volunteers from the Ukrainian region of Galicia - was established on April 28, 1943, to oppose the Soviet Union, which had begun to make major advances against Nazi Germany and its allies in the Great Patriotic War, the 1941-1945 segment of World War 2. The division committed numerous atrocities on the territory of the Soviet Union and Poland.

The division existed until mid-1944, when it suffered heavy losses in the Battle of Brody during a major Red Army offensive aimed at expelling the Nazi forces from Ukraine and eastern Poland.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Immigration Policy in First 100 Days 'Disaster' - Ex-Border Protection Official

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's lax immigration policy in his first 100 days in office has caused a disaster on the southern border and there appears to be no solid plan to deter the influx of migrants illegally crossing into the United States, former Customs and Border Protection (CBP) sector chief Victor Manjarrez told Sputnik.

Last month, CPB data revealed that US border apprehensions soared by more than 70 percent in March. The 172,331 migrant encounters recorded represents the highest monthly total in more than two decades, with the Biden administration on pace to top the previous annual record set in 2019 of over 977,000 apprehensions. The US president and other administration officials have said the surge is seasonal.

"I would characterize the president's performance on immigration as a disaster," Manjarrez said. "The Biden administration does not have a plan that has been unveiled, they have simply torn down existing policies of the previous administration."

Manjarrez, who served as a CBP sector chief in El Paso, Texas and Tucson, Arizona, said that Biden's immigration policy has jeopardized asylum-seeking migrants who want to enter the United States. The current immigration crisis on the US southern border will get worse if Biden's immigration policy remains unchanged, Manjarrez added.

Biden's immigration policy has been a disservice to Border Patrol agents who are protecting the US border, citizens of our country, Manjarrez said.

Shortly after taking office in January, Biden eliminated many of former President Donald Trump's immigration measures, including terminating the Migrant Protection Protocols program and halting construction of a wall along the 2,000-mile US border with Mexico. The Trump administration was able to construct 400 miles of the large steel wall structure despite lengthy court battles and opposition from Congress.

However, Biden kept Trump's policy to expel undocumented migrants with COVID-19 symptoms, even though undocumented migrant children who arrive at the border without a legal guardian are exempt from the rule, which has contributed to a record number of them being held in US facilities. As of Thursday, there are more than 23,000 migrant children in federal US custody.

Hope Border Institute Deputy Director Marisa Limon Garza praised Biden for ending the Trump-era Remain in Mexico (MPP) program and accepting asylum-seeking migrant children

who arrive alone at the border, in addition to working to address the root causes of migration in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. However, Garza said the Biden administration must do more.

"Families with young children and single adults continue to be turned back to Mexico each day, deportation flights continue to Haiti and ICE detention centers have outbreaks of COVID-19," Garza said. "It's a complex time. We encourage the administration to be bold and courageously partner with borderland communities like ours to keep turning the ship around and making good on our commitments for the most vulnerable across the globe to access asylum at our southern border."

Biden has said he reversed Trump's immigration policies because they were unwarranted, inhumane and inconsistent with America's values. The president and other officials have also

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Lockheed Martin Wins \$663Mln for More Hellfire Air-to-Surface Missiles - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The US military awarded Lockheed Martin more than \$663 million for additional Hellfire II missile production, the Defense Department said in a release.

"Lockheed Martin Missiles and Fire Control [of] Orlando, Florida was awarded a \$663,728,183 modification... contract for Hellfire II missile production," the release said on Friday.

Work on the contract will be performed in Orlando, Florida over the next three and a half years with an estimated completion date of September 30, 2024, the Department of Defense said.

The US Army Contracting Command at Redstone Arsenal in the US state of Alabama is the contracting activity for the program, it added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Sending Diplomat to India to Spearhead Cooperation on COVID-19 Fight - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador Daniel Smith is departing for New Delhi to lead efforts to help India fight the pandemic, the State Department said in a press release.

Earlier in the day, the White House said the US was immediately imposing restrictions on travel from India amid a recent surge in COVID-19 cases in the Asian country.

"Smith... will be departing for New Delhi to serve as Chargé d'Affaires, ad interim," the release said on Friday. "He will spearhead close cooperation with India to ensure that our countries continue to advance our shared priorities, including overcoming the global pandemic."

India's health ministry earlier on Friday said the country registered 386,452 new COVID-19 cases within the past 24 hours, marking the largest daily increase since the start of the outbreak.

The United States earlier this week announced it was sending some \$100 million in supplies to India to assist in fighting the surge.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Sending Diplomat to India to Spearhead Cooperation on COVID-19 Fight - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador Daniel Smith is departing for India to lead efforts to help India fight the pandemic, the State Department said in a press release.

Earlier in the day, the White House said the US was immediately imposing restrictions on travel from India amid a recent surge in COVID-19 cases in the Asian country.

"Smith... will be departing for New Delhi to serve as Chargé d'Affaires, ad interim," the release said on Friday. "He will spearhead close cooperation with India to ensure that our countries continue to advance our shared priorities, including overcoming the global pandemic."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Canada to Withhold J&J Vaccine Amid Probe Into US Manufacturing Facility - Statement

TORONTO, April 30 (Sputnik) - Canada will withhold the coronavirus vaccine produced by Johnson & Johnson subsidiary Janssen Pharmaceuticals from public use amid an investigation into quality control issues at a US vaccine manufacturing plant where they were produced, Health Canada said.

Earlier this month, Johnson & Johnson admitted to having produced a faulty batch of coronavirus vaccines at an East Baltimore facility, reportedly due to a mix-up of two ingredients that led to the ruining of about 15 million doses. Canada had received its first shipment of 300,000 Johnson & Johnson vaccine doses - manufactured at the same East Baltimore Emergent BioSolutions facility currently under investigation - earlier in the week.

"As with all vaccines imported into Canada, the Janssen vaccines will only be released for distribution once Health Canada is satisfied that they meet the Department's high standards for quality, safety and efficacy," Canada's health regulator said in a statement on Friday.

Health Canada is working with Johnson & Johnson and the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to verify the quality, safety and efficacy of the received shipment, the statement said.

The regulator added that it remains confident that the 1.5 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine that were 'loaned' to Canada by the Biden administration and produced at the Baltimore plant are safe for use.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

RTC - UNSC Asks Brunei Foreign Minister to Appoint ASEAN Envoy for Myanmar - UK Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 30 (Sputnik) - Several members of the UN Security Council called on Bruneian Foreign Minister II Dato Erywan Yusof to swiftly appoint an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Special Envoy to engage with the military authorities in Myanmar, UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations James Roscoe said as quoted by RIA Novosti.

On Friday, the UN Security Council held a closed meeting on the situation in Myanmar following the February 1 military coup in that country. The top Bruneian diplomat whose country is the chair of the ASEAN, and UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener, briefed the Security Council on the latest developments.

"Many of the [UN Security] Council members called on Brunei Foreign Minister to do what he could to expedite the process, in particular, in appointing an ASEAN Special Envoy," Roscoe said.

The UN Security Council members discussed the potential for cooperation between the ASEAN and the UN special envoys in engaging with the Myanmar military.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Naftogaz Will Be on Agenda of US-Ukraine Meeting Next Week - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will raise the issue of the Ukrainian energy company Naftogaz as well as governance practices in the management of state owned enterprises in the energy sector, Acting US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Philip Reeker told reporters.

"You have rightly noted the spokesman's [Ned Price] remarks and concerns about recent steps there in terms of the Cabinet of Ministers actions to manipulate some of the existing regulations and dismissing the supervisory board, and replacing the management of Ukraine's leading energy company Naftogaz," Reeker said. "We will continue to call on Ukraine's leaders and representatives to respect transparent corporate governance practices, particularly in the management of state owned enterprises and particularly in the energy sector which is so important in its economy. So clearly, this will be on our agenda when we meet with President Zelensky, and other officials."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blinken to Discuss Nord Stream 2 With German Officials Next Week - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will raise the issue of Nord Stream 2 pipeline with German officials his trip to Europe next week, Acting Assistant Secretary of State Philip Reeker told reporters.

"We will meet separately with the Germans in a bilat-format. Nord Stream 2 remains an issue. You've heard that from the President, from the secretary, from the spokesman, and we will continue to make very clear to the Germans our views of that project, that it should stop," Reeker said during a briefing on Friday.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Committed to Ensuring Ukraine Meets NATO Entrance Standards - Official

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The United States will work with Ukraine to ensure that it meets the criteria for NATO membership, Acting US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Philip Reeker told reporters.

"I think you are very aware that the Biden administration remains committed to ensuring that NATO's door remains open to aspirants when they are ready and able to meet commitments and obligations. We are committed certainly to ensuring that the country like Ukraine can work to meet those standards," Reeker said during a briefing.

Reeker spoke ahead of Secretary of State Antony Blinken's trip to Ukraine scheduled for next week.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UNSC Asks Brunei Foreign Minister to Appoint ASEAN Envoy for Myanmar - UK Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 30 (Sputnik) - Several members of the UN Security Council called on Bruneian Foreign Minister II Dato Erywan Yusof to swiftly appoint an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Special Envoy to engage with the military authorities in Myanmar, UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations James Roscoe told reporters.

On Friday, the UN Security Council held a closed meeting on the situation in Myanmar following the February 1 military coup in that country. The top Bruneian diplomat whose country is the chair of the ASEAN, and UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener, briefed the Security Council on the latest developments.

"Many of the [UN Security] Council members called on Brunei Foreign Minister to do what he could to expedite the process, in particular, in appointing an ASEAN Special Envoy," Roscoe said.

The UN Security Council members discussed the potential for cooperation between the ASEAN and the UN special envoys in engaging with the Myanmar military.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) -

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

- * The United States is actively discussing a potential date for holding a summit between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said.
- * Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev held a phone conversation with Sullivan, the Russian Security Council said.
- * Nothing prevents the United States from increasing staffing of its embassy in Russia and resuming usual consular work, the Russian Foreign Ministry said, adding that the embassy can hire 175 US citizens according to its quota.
- * Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the US Embassy's decision to stop processing applications for non-immigrant visas actually changes nothing, since visas were impossible to get anyway.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * The United States considers Russia's withdrawal of troops from the Ukraine border as a constructive step, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.
- * The United States is not discussing sending any arms to Ukraine "out of stride," Sullivan said.
- * Kiev has unilaterally stopped the passage of people via the Stanytsia Luhanska checkpoint on the Donbas contact line, the Ministry of State Security of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) said.
- * Moscow expects Kiev to voice precise proposals on a possible meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
- * The European Union is seriously concerned over the events around Ukraine's Naftogaz state-owned energy company, where the management was recently replaced, and calls on Kiev to ensure that all management decisions are in line with corporate governance standards, the European Commission's spokesman, Peter Stano, said.

BLAST IN AFGHANISTAN

- * At least 30 people died and over 60 more got injured on Friday following a powerful explosion in the Logar province in eastern Afghanistan, the 1TV broadcaster reported.
- * Dozens of people remain under the rubble of a building destroyed in an explosion in the Afghan city of Pol-e Alam, the capital of Logar province, Tolo News reported, citing sources.

EU-RUSSIA DISPUTE

* Russia has announced that eight citizens of the European Union member states and representatives of official state bodies of the bloc, including European Parliament President David Sassoli, are not allowed to enter Russia, the Foreign Ministry said on Friday.

* The Russian Foreign Ministry handed a note on reciprocal steps in connection with the anti-Russian sanctions to the head of EU Delegation to Russia, Markus Ederer, ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

* The European Union reserves the right to retaliate following Russia's latest decision on sanctions against EU officials, according to a joint statement by the heads of the European Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament.

KYRGYZSTAN-TAJIKISTAN TENSIONS

* Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov and his Tajik counterpart, Emomali Rahmon, have agreed to resolve the conflict on the border of the two countries peacefully, the Kyrgyz presidential office told Sputnik on Friday.

* Kyrgyzstan's death toll from the border conflict with Tajikistan grew to 31, while 154 people sustained injured, Kyrgyz Deputy Health Minister Aliza Soltonbekova said.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin is ready to mediate the Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflict, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov assured.

* The European Union regrets the violence that erupted this week on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border and offers technical assistance to normalize the situation, the European External Action Service (EEAS) said.

POLAND VIOLATES BELARUSIAN AIR SPACE

* A Polish helicopter illegally crossed into the Belarusian airspace, the Belarusian Defense Ministry said on Friday, adding that it is a second similar incident over the past month.

* An aircraft belonging to the Polish air force unintentionally crossed into the Belarusian airspace on Thursday, the operations command of the Polish armed forces said.

CRIMINAL PROBE INTO BELARUS COUP

* Nine people are being accused in the criminal probe launched in Belarus into the failed coup and the assassination plot against President Alexander Lukashenko, the prosecutor's office ruled to imprison five of them in absentia, the Belarusian State Security Committee (KGB)'s spokesman, Andrey Yarosh, said on Friday.

* Belarus has requested legal assistance from relevant justice institutions of the United States over the case related to the failed coup and the assassination plot against President Alexander Lukashenko, Yarosh said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

REVIEW - Canada's NDP Makes Headway on Progressive Priorities, But Leftists Yearn for Bolder Action

TORONTO, April 30 (Sputnik) - Canada's left-wing New Democrat Party, which is seeing a steady rise in the polls ahead of an anticipated election later in the year, is making headway on progressive priorities, activists told Sputnik, but emphasize they want to see bolder and more decisive actions by the party.

Earlier this month, the NDP - one of Canada's three main federal political parties - held its party convention, which is considered to be the last opportunity to showcase itself before a national audience and receive a bump in the polls.

Throughout the convention and the duration of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the NDP has drawn a line between itself and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberals amid a battle for the progressive vote. This juxtaposition was underscored by party leader Jagmeet Singh's convention keynote address, in which he highlighted Trudeau's alleged prioritization of the interests of Canada's elite class over the "average Joe."

Singh emphasized that his party is ready to take immediate action on issues that he says federal Liberals have failed to act on. In particular, the NDP leader delineated the establishment of government-owned and run long-term care facilities, tackling climate change and implementing universal pharmacare as issues the party will likely run on in the next election. NDP party members, past voters and supporters have lauded a number of policies the New Democrats are pursuing, some of which were formalized during the convention, including pledge to push for a C\$20 (\$16.27 USD) federal minimum wage, the establishment of publicly owned telecommunications company and an additional tax on the wealthiest Canadians. However, despite the perceived progress on many issues, many still want to see bolder action especially on topics long considered to be outside of the mainstream, including certain foreign policy items.

FOREIGN POLICY: VENEZUELA AND LATIN AMERICA

Aside from domestic issues, which have dominated discussion due to the myriad of social gaps that have emerged in Canada throughout the pandemic, there is a strong push among the party base to chart a foreign policy course divorced from the widely perceived convergence with US objectives.

Despite assurances that the third-largest opposition party will formalize policy opposing interference and sanctions against Venezuela and other priority resolutions drawing considerable support, including "Solidarity with Cuba," the convention tackled only two foreign policy resolutions.

By the conclusion of the conference, the party membership voted to press the federal New Democrats to call on the federal government to condemn India's crackdown on the farmers protests and begin initiate an international call to accountability for New Delhi and change to official party policy that would support Palestinian autonomy and sanction Israel until such time that "Palestinian rights are upheld."

Nevertheless, despite several resolutions, especially relating to Latin America, going unaddressed during the convention, Canadian Latin America Alliance (CLAA) board member Pablo Vivanco believes the NDP is making headway on an important issue to leftist voters.

"I had a sense that it was unlikely that [the Venezuela] motion would make it to the floor... which on the one hand is disappointing, on the other hand... it's positive that so many people in the NDP are recognizing the importance of the issue and are wanting their party to take a stance on it," Vivanco told Sputnik.

Vivanco also highlighted that increasing support from federal NDP members of parliament for ending interference in Venezuela's sovereign affairs and dropping sanctions against the South American country is a very positive sign for the movement.

CHINA AND RUSSIA

A point of divergence among Canada's left-wing continues to be attitudes towards China, and to a lesser degree, Russia.

Canada's political establishment continues to be entrenched in the United States' escalating standoff with China and deepening diplomatic spat with Russia, with the only disagreement amongst the country's two preeminent political parties – the Liberals and Conservatives – being which one will be tougher on its perceived "greatest threats."

While the NDP's top brass hasn't strayed from the prevailing sentiment towards China and Russia, at the grassroots level, there is disenchantment with conforming to what is considered to be a US foreign policy objective that is antithetical to the internationalist ideal many hold. The polarization around the issue is already leading to splintering, with a group of esteemed left-wing activists and scholars exiting Canada's bastion of left-wing journalism, Canadian Dimension, after the outlet refused to publish pieces that countered western mainstream positions concerning Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny and allegations of genocide in China's Xinjiang province.

One of the Canadian Dimension's former board members, lawyer, activist and politician Dimitri Lascaris, told Sputnik that fear plays a central role in the mainstream left's, including the NDP's, reluctance to openly question the Western consensus on China and Russia.

"I think that that has a lot to do with the... people at the leadership level of the party, not the grassroots. A lot of people at the grassroots are very critical of the Canadian government's foreign policy. But the leadership will be afraid. They're afraid of the consequences and how they will be perhaps disadvantaged politically if they have the courage to speak out," Lascaris said.

Indeed, China is becoming an increasingly sensitive topic in Canada, with only 14 percent of Canadians holding a favorable view of the East Asian nation and the vast majority supporting the denunciation of Beijing's actions in Xinjiang province as a genocide and a boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games.

Aside from public perception, Lascaris believes that the tightly controlled corporate and state media landscape in Canada not only stifles debate about China but, generally, impedes discussion about the state of the country's foreign policy.

"We can't have a productive, humane and law-abiding foreign policy, if we can't have a critical discussion and discussion that's objectively critical of our foreign policy," Lascaris says, emphasizing the harassment he has faced for his stance on China, Russia, Venezuela and Palestine.

"I've been vilified in the corporate media because of my position on questions like Palestinian rights or the sanctions were imposing on Iran and Venezuela or belligerence towards Russia and China. I've been absolutely vilified for that. And I am willing to take it. But it's hard and not many politicians are willing to do that. And it's stifling the kind of debate and discussion that we desperately need to have in this country about our morally bankrupt foreign policy," Lascaris adds.

SOCIALISM

The elephant in the room in recent years, and throughout the convention, was socialism. Increasingly popularized by former US presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, the affinity for socialist ideology has taken hold in most Western nations, with Canada being no exception. A 2019 Forum Research poll of 1,733 Canadian voters found that a majority – 58% of respondents – had a favorable view of socialism.

A significant part of the NDP membership wants to embrace socialism as its guiding ideology (if we are to extrapolate the results of the party presidency race and support for socialist candidate Jessa McLean, this group could make up as much as 40% of the party). However, discussion of socialism's place in the party was noticeably absent during the convention, to the chagrin of the party's socialist wing.

Lascaris, who believes that Canada's political ecosystem lacks true left-wing representation, says that the NDP leadership isn't ready to tackle the issue head-on.

"There is no socialist leader in the parliament of Canada," Lascaris said. "The leadership of the NDP is firmly ensconced in the center, perhaps the center left party, but they're not even remotely close to socialism yet."

The former Wall Street attorney added that by ignoring socialist voices, the mainstream left invites right-wing forces, including the likes of former US President Donald Trump, to exploit the social grievances which precipitated the resurgence of socialism.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Unlike many countries, even within the Western world, climate change is a top priority for Canadian voters. Poll after poll shows the environment to be among the top-three issues facing Canada.

Canada's New Democrats and Greens are generally perceived to have the most aggressive climate change plans, with the former promising to do away with carbon-emitting electricity by 2030 and often taunting the Trudeau's Liberals for apparent inconsistencies in its climate objectives, including the government's purchase of the controversial Trans Mountain Pipeline. However, despite passing resolutions calling for a "green recovery" from the COVID-19 pandemic – something also promised by Trudeau and his Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland – the party membership rejected a motion to make opposition to all new and existing fossil fuel projects and carbon-intensive infrastructure.

Singh, himself, hasn't explicitly ruled out approving future fossil fuel project, although hasn't identified a project he would support.

Also unclear is the proposed NDP-Green alliance on climate change, which would see a quasi-merger between the two oft-convergent parties on at least this particular issue.

Despite the proposition gaining traction at the grassroots level of both parties, those Sputnik spoke to indicated that they don't foresee progress on this initiative. 350.org, a Canadian climate change advocacy, which led the effort, declined repeated requests for a comment.

Ultimately, Lascaris, a former Green Party leadership candidate, says Canada needs a bolder climate action plan than any party in the country is ready to adopt.

"Any party is truly committed to resolving the climate emergency would need to openly embrace a complete ban on all new oil and gas exploration," Lascaris said. "The NDP leadership is a long, long way away from being serious about dealing with the climate, which is a bit better than the Liberals, for sure, considerably better than the Conservatives. But they're not nearly as bold as we need to be in order to avoid a climate catastrophe."

ELECTION PROSPECTS

However, despite the apparent contradictions within the party, Singh's grip on the party remains strong, with 87.2% voting to reject a leadership contest. It now remains to be seen whether Singh can continue to command a unified force into a possible election. For its part, Singh and the party leadership have placed the spotlight on issues that unite the party members while striving to avoid sharp edges.

For now, it appears that the NDP is reaping the rewards of their labor during the convention, with most polls suggesting the party received a 1 to 2 percent jump in the two weeks since the convention and is increasingly within striking distance of the official opposition Conservative Party.

However, the New Democrats, with a sizable voting base of young Canadians, have been known to poll far better than the actual turnout at the polls – the NDP consistently polled near the 20 percent mark during the 2019 federal election, only to receive 16 percent of the popular vote on election day – and as such must pay attention to the prerogatives of the base, said those who spoke to Sputnik.

"At the end of the day, even if people prefer your party over their parties, if they don't vote for you, it doesn't mean anything. And so, if the NDP doesn't put forward a bold left-wing agenda – and it has yet to do that – then a lot of people are just not going to be motivated to vote and support the party. They have to find a way to energize the base," Lascaris said.

Despite some regret regarding the scarcity of foreign policy discussion in Canadian politics, Vivanco believes the election, which will come in the midst or on the heels of a pandemic, will be fought on domestic issues.

"Certainly, this year, with a pandemic, with the disaster vaccine rollout, I don't think that foreign policy is going to be the first thing on Canadians minds. I think the economic situation, all those things are probably going to weigh heavier," Vivanco said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Extends Face Mask Mandate for Public Transportation Until September 13 - TSA

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The US Transportation Security Administration said on Friday that it has extended the face mask mandate for public transportation until September 13. "The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is extending the face mask requirement for individuals across all transportation networks throughout the United States, including at airports, onboard commercial aircraft, on over-the-road buses, and on commuter bus and rail systems through September 13," the release said.

The release also underscored that in spite of the new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for fully vaccinated people announced in April, CDC still requires all individuals to wear a face mask during public transportation.

TSA introduced the mask mandate on February 1, requiring individuals to wear a face mask at TSA airport screening checkpoints and throughout the commercial and public transportation systems, that was set to expire on May 11.

On January 31, the agency also recommended to impose fines on individuals who violate the face mask requirement ranging from \$250 for the first offense up to \$1500 for repeat offenders.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

ANALYSIS - Biden Tax Plan Could Affect Ordinary Americans, Spark Recession in US

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's plan to heavily tax millionaires and billionaires to fund growth in the United States could spark a recession as the wealthy might not invest in the economy like before and find ways to pass the higher burden to ordinary citizens, analysts told Sputnik.

In one of the most ambitious development plans laid out by a US president since Franklin Roosevelt, Biden aims to raise \$1.8 trillion over the next decade to fund childcare, universal pre-kindergarten education and paid leave for workers.

Biden has said his key strategy is to increase the capital gains tax to 39.6 percent on individuals earning more than \$1 million a year from the current rate of 20 percent. Capital gains are proceeds obtained from selling any product - including real estate, vehicles or art - though they typically refer to money made from investing or trading in stocks and other financial instruments. Biden also said he seeks to raise the marginal tax income rate to 39.5 percent, from 37 percent now, on households making \$400,000 or more per year although some administration officials have hinted the tax hike may affect anyone who earns more than \$200,000 per year.

In addition, Biden ordered the US Treasury Department to work on a plan to increase the US corporate tax rate to 28 percent from 21 percent to fund a separate \$2.3 trillion infrastructure program.

"The way he's doing it, it won't increase the tax revenue," Lance Roberts, chief investment strategist at the Houston based financial firm RIA Advisors, said. "Biden will actually wind up affecting the economy; hurting the average American worker; not really raising more functional revenue at all; and get us deeper into debt in the next five to ten years."

TAX HIKES TRICKLE DOWN, TAX CUTS DO NOT

Roberts said it is a mistake for the Biden administration to assume that it can increase taxes for those in the higher bracket without affecting those in the lower tax brackets.

"That's because tax hikes trickle down; tax cuts don't," Roberts said. "Ninety percent of all the financial assets in the market are owned by 10 percent of the people. They are the ones that create most of the jobs in the country, they are your business owners, your executives etc. If you're going to raise capital gains tax on them, they are going to pass that cost on to the rest of the economy through higher prices for their products and services. So, the people who end up paying the most amount of taxes - including their own personal income tax and now the passed-on higher tax burden of the rich - are those at the bottom of the income chain."

But when business owners get tax breaks - such as the 14-percent cut in corporate tax by Biden's predecessor Donald Trump in 2017 - the opposite often happens.

"The net impact of Trump's tax cuts was to incentivize companies to buy back their own stock; that's why you had record stock buybacks during his term," said Roberts.

Steven Keller, investment manager at New York-based Wexler Capital, said Biden risks triggering a major selloff on the stock market by the 10 percent of investors who own 90 percent of the capital if his administration persists on implementing the proposed measures.

"You'll devastate the balance 90 percent of the investors who rely on the market for their 401K retirement plan and probably put the economy back into recession," Keller said.

A recession is defined as two straight quarters of economic slowdown. The United States has barely recovered from the coronavirus-induced recession that occurred between the first and second quarters of 2020, with the pandemic still weighing on the economy.

BIDEN HAS ENFORCERS, THE WEALTHY HAVE LAWYERS

Both Keller and Roberts say Biden's plan to spend tens of billions of additional dollars each year to equip the Internal Revenue Service with more resources to pursue tax evaders might not get desired results, especially if the rich were also paying for the best legal help to avoid getting ensnared by the tax man.

Tax experts say most owed taxes are paid within a couple of years after an audit, while the rest trickle in slowly and sometimes are never collected.

Roberts said one should bear in mind the wealthy have very good tax attorneys and the money is fungible.

"Money can be moved into other assets that are not taxable. It can be moved to offshore tax havens. That's why Amazon, eBay and IBM pay no taxes at all," Roberts said.

Biden proposed last month a global minimum for corporate taxes and vowed to crack down on large US companies that have long employed complex maneuvers to reduce or eliminate their tax bills by shifting income on paper between countries.

For instance, Apple, the iconic iPhone maker, parks its profits in the island of Jersey, which has zero corporate tax and is located in the English Channel, between England and France.

More than a thousand other big, mostly US corporations - including eBay, Google, Apple, Facebook, PayPal, Microsoft, Yahoo, AOL, Twitter, Intel, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson - have their tax base in Ireland, which has a corporate tax of just 12.5 percent compared to the US rate of 21 percent.

For an idea of the kind of complication Biden could run into, Roberts cited former President Bill Clinton's move in the 1990s to try and limit non-taxable executive compensation to \$1 million.

"When [former President Bill] Clinton did that, the corporations got together with the Wall Street banks and said 'Great, let's do stock option plans,'" Roberts said. "Similarly, if you decide to start raising taxes on me for making more than \$400,000, I'll say 'no problem.' My declared income from next year will be \$399,999.99. I will find other ways to compensate myself by getting my company to buy my car, my house and pay for my business trip with my entire family tagging along, and we won't even call that a vacation."

Few analysts believe Biden's multi-trillion dollar development blueprint for the United States will find its way through Congress without major downsizing, due to his Democrat party's razor-thin majority of one vote in the Senate and the rival Republicans intent to block the plan in its original form. Just in March, Congress approved Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill, but meanwhile he proposed his \$2.3 trillion infrastructure plan and additional spending that amounts to \$6 trillion.

Republicans have said such level of spending is exceedingly wasteful and will certainly bring in hyperinflation as well as capital flight that may decimate the economy.

Aside from Republicans, the US Chamber of Commerce, which represents more than 3 million business owners in the country, has vowed to stop Biden's proposed tax hikes, with its Chief Executive Suzanne Clark calling them "outrageous" and wanting to punish people for investing in the economy.

MASSIVE US DEFICITS LIKELY FROM BIDEN'S PLAN

Keller said even if the president got his wish of hiking corporate taxes to 28 percent and almost doubling capital gains taxes to 40 percent, "the amount of tax revenue that will be generated over the next 15 years won't even pay for the \$6 trillion in COVID-19 spending that's already done."

"Also Biden now has plans to make some things like child care tax credits permanent," Keller said. "So, we're going to continue to run massive deficits because the tax increases won't generate enough revenue."

The US budget deficit rose to \$1.71 trillion in the first six months of fiscal 2021, with a record monthly expansion of \$660 billion in March, the Treasury Department said.

The government's tax total revenue for fiscal year 2021 is, meanwhile, is estimated to be at just under \$3.9 trillion.

CONSUMPTION TAX AS A POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE

The bipartisan Congressional Budget Office estimates that increasing the Internal Revenue Service's funding for audits would increase revenues by between \$61 billion to \$103 billion over ten years, depending on how much the agency's budget is increased.

That is far more conservative than the \$1.15 trillion in revenue that former Treasury Secretary Larry Summers says can be obtained if the agency's budget is boosted by \$100 billion over the next ten years.

Summer said he thinks more than 70 percent of the gross he has estimated - some \$715 billion - would come from additional audits. That is one of the arguments that has enticed Biden into thinking that the way to fund US growth was to heavily tax its super wealthy.

Roberts said he thinks a better idea would if Biden implements a consumption tax.

"If he's smart, he'll do that. That will fix the problem because the rich buy jets, Porsches and Bugattis, and the poor buy Mazdas and Volkswagens. A consumption tax is relevant to all income levels. That's how you raise tax revenue."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Aung San Suu Kyi Still Only Hope for Democracy in Myanmar - US Senator McConnell

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - Deposed State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi remains the only credible hope for the restoration of democracy in Myanmar, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said on Friday.

"The only hope for Burma to become a genuine democracy is to stick with her," McConnell told a podcast of the Sedona Forum. "If not her, then who?"

Suu Kyi served as State Counsellor, a post akin to prime minister of Myanmar from 2016 until she and her government were toppled in a military coup in February. McConnell acknowledged that even when holding power, she was unable to control the country's powerful military. He went on to commend the administration of US President Joe Biden for its policy on Myanmar, saying the White House had enacted all its options.

"I do want to compliment the Biden administration. I do think they are, at this point on this issue, squeezing what few sanctions, levers, we have left against this military regime," he said. McConnell said the Biden administration should bring the case for restoring Aung San to power and ending the military takeover to the United Nations Security Council and should turn the dispute into a bigger issue rather than one that "no one ever pays any attention to" around the world.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Pentagon Halts US Border Wall Projects Using Diverted Funds - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department has terminated all southern border wall projects that use money funneled from other missions, Deputy Pentagon spokesperson Jamal Brown said in a statement on Friday.

"The Department of Defense is proceeding with canceling all border barrier construction projects paid for with funds originally intended for other military missions and functions such as schools for military children, overseas military construction projects in partner nations and the National Guard and Reserve equipment account," Brown said. "DoD has begun taking all necessary actions to cancel border barrier projects and to coordinate with interagency partners."

Former President Donald Trump diverted Pentagon funds for the construction of the wall, but President Joe Biden on his first day in office ordered a halt to the diversion of funds for the barrier.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Completes DPRK Policy Review, Will Not Focus on Achieving 'Grand Bargain' - White House

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The United States has finished its policy review on North Korea and its approach will not focus on achieving a grand bargain with Pyongyang, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday.

"I can confirm that we have completed our DPRK policy review, which was thorough, rigorous and inclusive," Psaki said, noting that they consulted closely with outside experts and predecessors from several previous administrations.

Psaki underscored Washington's goal remains the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

"Our policy will not focus on achieving a grand bargain nor will it rely on strategic patience," the spokesperson stressed.

Psaki also said the United States has been in close touch with allies and partners through the process of the review.

"We have and will continue to consult with the Republic of Korea, Japan and other allies and partners at every step along the way," she said.

Earlier this month, reports from the US intelligence community indicated that North Korea may resume testing of its nuclear and missile technology in an attempt to reshape the region's security environment.

In late March, North Korea confirmed that it tested new tactical guided missiles, considering this an implementation of the sovereign state's right to self-defense.

The dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang has stalled since the failed February 2019 summit in Hanoi, during which the United States demanded more decisive steps from North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons and Pyongyang accused Washington of not responding to the steps already taken. The 2019 October talks in Sweden failed to break the deadlock.

The inter-Korean dialogue is also at a low point following North Korea's decision to cut all lines of communication with Seoul last June.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Approves Proposed \$2.42Bln Sale of Patrol Planes to India - Defense Agency

WASHINGTON, April 30, (Sputnik) - The US State Department has given its approval to a proposed plan to sell approximately \$2.42 billion worth of P-81 patrol aircraft to the Indian government, according to an announcement by the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) on Friday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of India of six (6) P-81 Patrol aircraft and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$2.42 billion," the DSCA said.

The proposed sale, which has been sent to Congress for further approval, also includes GPS, anti-missile, and tactical radio systems among other related technologies intended for use with the aircraft.

The equipment is intended to help the US support its own foreign policy and national security objectives in the region in cooperation with India, which is a major US partner in the Indo-Pacific and South Asian regions.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

New COVID-19 Variants Make Up Majority of New Cases in Canada - Top Health Official

TORONTO, April 30 (Sputnik) – Variants of the coronavirus disease now make up the majority of new cases in Canada, the country's Chief Public Health Officer Theresa Tam said on Friday. "Variants of concern now represent the majority of reported COVID-19 cases," Tam said during a press briefing.

The vast majority of variant cases – 95 percent – are of the B.1.1.7 strain, which was first identified in the United Kingdom, Tam said.

The variants have also spurred an intensifying third wave of the pandemic across Canada, with the federal government moving to approve several requests for help from different jurisdictions. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told reporters during the same briefing that his government is deploying 60 military service members to Nova Scotia, which is reporting a surge in new COVID-19 cases, to help at testing centers.

The federal government also approved requests for support in long-term care facilities in New Brunswick and for more equipment in the territory in Nunavut.

As of Friday, the country's public health agency has reported over 1,211,000 cases and more than 24,150 coronavirus-related fatalities.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Extended Troika Urges Afghanistan to Engage Openly With Taliban on Settlement - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The extended Troika, comprising of the United States, Russia, China and Pakistan, in a joint statement on Friday called on the Afghan government to engage openly with the Taliban counterparts on a negotiated settlement in the Islamic Republic. "We urge the Government of the Islamic Republic and the High Council for National Reconciliation to engage openly with their Taliban counterparts regarding a negotiated settlement," the statement said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Extended Troika Expects Taliban to Prevent Terrorists From Using Afghan Soil - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The so-called extended Troika on peaceful settlement in Afghanistan - the United States, Russia, China and Pakistan - in a joint statement on Friday expressed hope that the Taliban will prevent terrorist groups from using Afghan territory to threaten the security of other countries.

Earlier in the day, the extended Troika met in Doha, Qatar, with representatives from the Afghan government and the opposition Taliban movement to support peace negotiations and help the parties reach a settlement.

"We expect the Taliban to fulfill its counterterrorism commitments, including preventing terrorist groups and individuals from using Afghan soil to threaten the security of any other country; not hosting these groups and preventing them from recruiting, training, and fundraising," the statement said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Administration to Restrict Travel From India Starting May 4 - White House

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) – President Joe Biden's administration will restrict travel from India starting May 4 due to the ongoing COVID-19 surge in the country, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"On the advice of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Administration will restrict travel from India starting immediately," Psaki said in a statement. "The policy will be implemented in light of extraordinarily high COVID-19 caseloads and multiple variants circulating in the India. The policy will take effect on Tuesday, May 4."

The ban will not apply to American citizens or lawful permanent residents and remains unknown how long restrictions will last in view of the COVID-19 situation in India, CNN reported.

Earlier in the day, India reported 386,452 new COVID-19 cases within the past 24 hours, marking the largest daily increase since the start of the outbreak.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Administration to Restrict Travel From India Starting May 4 - CNN

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) – President Joe Biden's administration plans to restrict travel from India starting May 4 due to the ongoing COVID-19 surge in the country, CNN reported on Friday, citing a White House official.

According to the report, the Biden Administration will announce the restrictions in line with guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control. The ban will not apply to American citizens or lawful permanent residents.

It also remains unknown how long will the restrictions will last in view of the COVID-19 situation in India, CNN reported.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Exit Policy in Afghanistan 'Unfortunate' - US Senate Republican Leader

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's decision to evacuate all remaining US combat forces from Afghanistan by September 11 is "unfortunate" and will probably lead to a total takeover by the Taliban of the entire country, US Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said on Friday.

"I think it is a very unfortunate decision," McConnell told a podcast of the Sedona Forum. "We haven't lost a single person in combat in Afghanistan in over a year. ... What I fear is by the end of the year the Taliban will be back in charge in Afghanistan."

McConnell acknowledged that Biden's decision would prove popular in the short term, but cautioned that all US allies in the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan would also entirely remove their forces from the country at the same time.

"The president will get a short term headline that everyone will like. ... [There are] twice as many allied troops in Afghanistan now as US ones, but they will all pull out too. I fear we're setting the predicate here for Afghanistan looking pretty much again like it used to," McConnell said.

The Biden administration had decided that the war on terror was "over-hyped" and wanted to switch resources away from it to great power competition with Russia and China instead.

However, the war on terror was not going to end simply because the US government gave up on it, McConnell added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Ontario Request to Halt Arrival of Int'l Students to Be Formalized Friday – Trudeau

TORONTO, April 30 (Sputnik) – The premier of the Canadian province of Ontario has asked the federal government to suspend the arrival of international students to the province and the request will be formalized later in the day, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday.

"Premier [Doug] Ford asked that we suspend the arrival of international students," Trudeau told reporters. "We'll be reaching out to their officials today to formalize that request."

Ford made the request during Trudeau's call with provincial premiers on Thursday evening amid a third wave of the coronavirus pandemic.

Ontario has been among the hardest-hit provinces during the latest wave, which has forced the province to implement additional coronavirus-related public health restrictions, including an extension of the province-wide stay-at-home order and checkpoints at provincial borders.

Ford has repeatedly called on the federal government to curtail the number of entrants into Ontario, going so far as to suggest a complete halt of arrivals from international destinations.

The federal government is now appearing to, at least partially, acquiesce to the premier's demand. At the same time, Trudeau noted that the number of cases related to international travel is minuscule and that Canada already has some of the strongest border measures in the world.

Ontario is reporting nearly 4,000 people testing positive for the novel coronavirus daily and the province has recorded 463,364 cases and over 8,000 virus-related deaths since the onset of the pandemic a year ago. An expert panel advising the Ford government projects that daily

caseloads could, surpassing earlier projections, even with increased public health measures in place, swell to over 15,000 by the middle of June.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden-Putin Meeting Not Confirmed But Topics Could Include Navalny, Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - A meeting between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin has not been confirmed yet but the possible agenda may address topics like opposition leader Alexey Navalny, the situation in Ukraine as well as Iran, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday.

When asked about possible topics for discussion between Putin and Biden, Psaki states, "I expect if and when we have a meeting confirmed, we'll have more to talk about what an agenda would look like, but we are not quite there at the process yet."

"But broadly speaking, our focus is ensuring we are working towards a more stable and predictable relationship, that we raise concerns when we have them which we continue to have concerns, of course, including about the detainment of Alexey Navalny, including about military buildup of troops on the border of Ukraine. But we see there's also areas where we can work together... on diplomatic efforts as it relates to Iran through the P5+1," she said. "So, I expect that to be in the pool of topics but we are not quite there. There is not a meeting confirmed, nor a date or timeline. If and when there is, we'll have more to say as we get close to it."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Administration to Pursue New Path on North Korea Nuclear Program - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will be pursuing a new approach to negotiating with North Korea about the dismantling of that country's nuclear and ballistic missile programs in exchange for removal of sanctions, the Washington Post reported on Friday. The Biden administration is not seeking a grand bargain or an all-or-nothing approach but has settled on a calibrated and practical approach to diplomacy with North Korea with the goal of eliminating the threat to the United States, the report quoted a senior administration official as saying on Thursday.

The new plan involves a phased agreement between the two countries that would partially remove sanctions in exchange for partially dismantling the weapons programs, the report said. Engagement with other US partners in East Asia is both important and uncertain, given the role that China would likely have to play in the negotiating process, the report said.

Escalating tensions between the United States and China could threaten their role in forging a successful agreement, but the Biden administration seeks to continue cooperating with Beijing to enforce sanctions and keep diplomatic channels open.

Earlier this month, reports from the US intelligence community indicated that North Korea may resume testing of its nuclear and missile technology in an attempt to reshape the region's security environment.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Briefs UNSC on Meetings With Military, ASEAN - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, April 30 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener on Friday updated in detail the members of the UN Security Council on the context of her recent engagements with senior officials from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Myanmar military regarding the current situation in the country.

Earlier on Friday, the UN Security Council met behind closed doors to discuss the political turmoil and human rights violation following the military coup on February 1 in Myanmar.

"This was part of an interactive discussion, so we're not able to tell you any in any detail what Christine Schraner Burgener had to say," United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq said when asked to share the details of the special envoy's briefing before the UN Security Council.

"You are aware that she met with the head of the Tatmadaw [armed forces of Myanmar], she met with different foreign ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, so of course she's providing a more in-depth discussion with the Security Council members about the sort of work she's taken," Haq said.

In early April, Schraner Burgener traveled to Bangkok after the Tatmadaw did not grant her access to visit Myanmar. The special envoy then traveled to Jakarta, where she met senior ASEAN officials and Myanmar's Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing.

The United Nations spokesman said Schraner Burgener also discussed at the UN Security Council the organization's priorities in Myanmar, including the release of all political prisoners and ensuring the improvement of the human rights situation.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Ready to Use High-Level Diplomatic Channels With Russia on Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The United States wants to use high-level private diplomatic channels with Russia to address the situation concerning Ukrainian, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"Our goal here, particularly where it comes to Ukraine, is to be vigilant and public and unabashed in saying that we support and stand up for sovereignty and territorial integrity but then to use high-level private diplomatic channels to communicate with the Russians about how we manage this situation going forward alongside consultations with the Germans, the French and other key actors in the diplomacy around Ukraine," Sullivan said.

Sullivan pointed out that as part of the United States' ongoing security relationship with Ukraine, Washington has provided defensive equipment to Kiev as well as some forms of training. In addition, Sullivan underscored the United States relationship with Ukraine is also economic as well as diplomatic.

"Not just our direct diplomatic engagement with Ukraine and with Ukrainian people but our engagement across Europe to have a range of countries standing together with us in defensive Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity," Sullivan said. "We believe that we can do all of these things and be resolute and firm while at the same time very much supporting resolution of the conflict, diplomatic progress, de-escalation all in service ultimately producing an outcome from the Minsk process that finally fully resolves what is an ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine." Last week, the Russian Defense Ministry said troops that were engaged in the combat readiness check in the vicinity of Ukraine are returning to their permanent bases as per the order of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu who said they should complete the return by May 1. Ukraine and the United States have recently voiced concerns over the situation on the Russia-Ukraine, including about the alleged Russian military buildup there, and urged Moscow to deescalate.

Russia said all of its troop movements are aimed at ensuring its national security in response to NATO's buildup near Russia's borders. Russia has also repeatedly said it was not party to the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Half of Myanmar Could Live in Poverty by 2022 Due to Pandemic, Political Crisis - UN

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The economic impact of the pandemic and a worsening security situation in Myanmar could double the number of people living in poverty there, meaning that roughly half of the population could be living in poverty by next year, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) said on Friday.

"After more than a decade of hard-won gains in the fight against poverty, the number of poor people in Myanmar could double as a result of the combined impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing political crisis," the UNDP said.

The warning is based on the results of a study entitled "COVID-19, Coup d'état and Poverty: Compounding Negative Shocks and Their Impact on Human Development in Myanmar." The study concluded that the pandemic has caused poverty rates to rise in the country by an estimated 11 percent, and that the worsening human rights situation in the country could drive it up by an additional 12 percent. Women and children are expected to be hit hardest by the rise in poverty.

Myanmar underwent a military coup in February of this year, resulting in allegations of human rights violations in the country, including the shooting and killing of peaceful protesters. On Thursday, the EU extended sanctions on those military officials responsible for the coup and human rights violations, in addition to having allocated \$24.5 million towards humanitarian assistance in the country.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UN Special Envoy Holds Talks With Tajik, Kyrgyz Top Diplomats on Border Clash - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 30 (Sputnik) - UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Central Asia Natalia Gherman on Friday discussed with the foreign ministers of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan the recent recent clashes at the border between the two countries, United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Friday.

"Our Special Representative for Central Asia Natalia Gherman held telephone conversations today with the foreign ministers of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to discuss the current situation at the Kyrgyz-Tajik border," Haq said.

The spokesman said Gherman expressed her deepest regret about the loss of life and injuries but welcomed the dialogue between the presidents of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and the resumption of work of the Intergovernmental Commission on Delimitation and Demarcation of the border.

Gherman also expressed support for the steps taken to de-escalate the situation and urged the two Central Asian countries to intensify efforts to find a long-term solution to border disputes through peaceful means.

Armed clashes broke out on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border on Thursday, leaving dozens of people dead and more than 150 others injured on both sides before a truce was declared the next day.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Reaches Milestone of 100Mln Vaccinated Against COVID-19 – White House

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The United States has crossed the mark of 100 million citizens fully vaccinated, nearly 40 percent of the US adult population, and remains on track to provide enough shots for the rest by the end of May, the White House COVID-19 response coordinator Jeff Zients announced on Friday.

"Today, we have reached a major milestone on the number of Americans who are fully vaccinated. Today, 100 million Americans are fully vaccinated. Nearly double the 55 million who were fully vaccinated the end of March," Zients said during a briefing.

The category of fully vaccinated includes individuals two weeks after getting their last shot.

"Over 300 million doses shipped, 220 million shots in arms, 100 million fully vaccinated individuals. This represents significant progress and cause for hope," Zients said adding that the current daily vaccination rate stands at 2.6 million doses.

He reaffirmed plans to have enough vaccines to inoculate all adult Americans by the end of next month.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Rochelle Walensky said that the country may expect to return to a more normal lifestyle by July 1.

"If we can continue at this pace, case rates are coming down, the vaccinations are going up, I think, July 1 would be a reasonable target," she said.

Her forecast is in line with President Joe Biden's pledges to restore partial normalcy by Independence Day celebrated on July 4.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blinken, Morocco Foreign Minister Agree to Boost Economic Ties - State Department

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita agreed in a phone conversation to further expand economic relations between their two countries, Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"Secretary Antony Blinken and Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita spoke today," Price said in a readout of the conversation. "They discussed opportunities to increase cooperation in Africa to promote economic prosperity and stability and the Secretary highlighted Morocco's key role in fostering stability in the Sahel and Libya."

Blinken also welcomed Morocco's steps to improve relations with Israel and noted that the Morocco-Israel relationship would bring long-term benefits for both countries, the readout said. Blinken further encouraged Morocco to continue implementing reforms and to reaffirm its commitment to protecting and promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms, the readout added.

The secretary of state commended King Mohamed VI's leadership combating climate change and investing in renewable energy and encouraged Morocco to help promote green economic growth and development in Africa, according to the readout.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Justice Department Launching 120-Day Cyber Threat Review – Deputy Attorney General Monaco

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Justice is set to launch a review of its ability to deter and disrupt cyber-attacks from criminals and national entities, Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco said at the Munich Cyber Security Conference on Friday.

"We are launching this week, under my direction, a review of how the department is looking at exactly this set of challenges [cyber threats]," Monaco said. "We want to bring forth actionable recommendations in a 120 day timeframe – so there is no time to lose – on what can we be doing better, working with our partners across borders to address these threats,"

The announcement comes amid a recent rise in ransomware attacks by criminal enterprises, sometimes in collaboration with nation states, as well as the SolarWinds and Microsoft Exchange attacks which Washington has blamed on Russia and China respectively. The review is meant to explore how the DOJ can best use the tools at its disposal to combat such threats on our nation's infrastructure, and will look at how new technologies such as digital currencies and AI are being used in the commission of cyberattacks against the US.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Sees Russia's Forces Withdrawal From Ukraine Border as Constructive Step - White House

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The United States considers Russia's withdrawal of troops from the Ukraine border as a constructive step, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"We have taken note of the fact that they have pulled a significant amount of their forces back off the border and returned them to their home bases, this is a constructive step," Sullivan said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Not Discussing Sending Any Arms to Ukraine 'Out of Stride' - National Security Advisor

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The United States is not discussing sending any arms to Ukraine "out of stride," National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"We have an ongoing security relationship, there is no discussion of doing something out of stride," Sullivan said when asked whether the Biden administration is discussing sending additional military equipment to Ukraine.

However, Sullivan noted that the United States has filled in such requests from Ukraine in the past and will fill the requests in the future given that Washington is willing to provide certain types of material.

"That's an ongoing dialogue that we have between our security teams and their security teams," he said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Security Advisor Says Iran Talks in 'Unclear' Place, Uncertain if Deal Coming Soon

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) – Iran Nuclear Deal talks are in an 'unclear' place in Vienna and it remains uncertain whether an agreement will be reached in the coming weeks, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"They [negotiations] are in a sort of unclear place in Vienna meaning that we've seen willingness of all sides, including the Iranians to talk seriously about sanctions relief and nuclear restrictions, and a pathway back into the JCPOA, but it is still uncertain as to whether this will culminate in a deal in Vienna in the coming weeks," Sullivan said during the Aspen Institute webinar.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UN Secretary-General Offers Condolences to Israel on Stampede Tragedy - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonion Guterres on Friday offered his condolences to the families of the victims of the stampede tragedy at the Mount Meron religious festival in Israel.

"My heart goes out to the people of Israel following the terrible tragedy at Mount Meron," Guterres said in a statement. "I offer my condolences to the families and loved ones of those who lost their lives, and wish a speedy recovery to the injured."

On Thursday, around 100,000 Ultra-Orthodox Jews had gathered at Mount Meron in the north of Israel to celebrate the Lag B'Omer festival when the stampede occurred.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has declared Sunday as a national day of mourning. The festival was the first major public event to be held in Israel after the coronavirus restrictions were reduced.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Ready to Use High-Level Diplomatic Channels With Russia on Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The United States wants to use high-level private diplomatic channels with Russia to address the situation around Ukrainian, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"Our goal here, particularly where it comes to Ukraine, is to be vigilant and public and unabashed in saying that we support and stand up for sovereignty and territorial integrity but then to use high-level private diplomatic channels to communicate with the Russians about how we manage this situation going forward alongside consultations with the Germans, the French and other key actors in the diplomacy around Ukraine," Sullivan said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Stands With Israel Over Mount Meron Festival Stampede That Killed 45 - Biden

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The United States expressed its solidarity with Israel and with Jewish communities around the world over the stampede that killed at least 45 people and injured 150 more at a religious celebration at Mount Meron, President Joe Biden said on Friday. "The United States stands with the people of Israel, and with Jewish communities the world over, in mourning the terrible tragedy at Mount Meron," Biden said in a statement. "I spoke with Prime Minister Netanyahu today to offer my profound condolences on behalf of the American people to our friends in Israel."

Around 100,000 Orthodox Jews had gathered at Mount Meron in the north of Israel to celebrate the Lag Ba'Omer festival when the stampede occurred.

"The loss of life among worshipers practicing their faith is heartbreaking. I have instructed my team to offer our assistance to the government and people of Israel as they respond to the disaster and care for the wounded," Biden said.

The Biden administration was also working to confirm reports that US citizens may have lost their lives or been wounded during the tragedy, he added.

Netanyahu has declared Sunday as a national day of mourning. The festival was the first major public event held in Israel after COVID-19 restrictions were reduced.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Actively Discussing Meeting Date for Putin-Biden Summit - National Security Adviser

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The United States is actively discussing a potential date for holding a summit between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"We are actively discussing that issue," Sullivan said, noting that he spoke with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev. "We are trying to make plans for a summit this summer in a third country in Europe, no date has been fixed, no location has been fixed but it's actively under discussion."

Sullivan also said Biden believes such a summit would be valuable in the efforts to establish better understanding between the two countries and get bilateral relations on a more stable and predictable path.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Ontario Request to Halt Arrival of Int'l. Students to Be Formalized on Friday - Trudeau

TORONTO, April 30 (Sputnik) – The premier of the Canadian province of Ontario has asked the federal government to suspend the arrival of international students in the province and the request will be formalized later in the day, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday.

"Premier [Doug] Ford asked that we suspend the arrival of international students," Trudeau told reporters. "We'll be reaching out to their officials today to formalize that request."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

IOM Seeks \$87Mln to Help Migrants Impacted by COVID-19 in East, Horn of Africa

UNITED NATIONS, April 30 (Sputnik) - The International Organization for Migration (IOM) on Friday made an appeal to donors for \$87 million that will enable it to support vulnerable migrants and host communities impacted by the coronavirus pandemic throughout the East and the Horn of Africa.

"COVID-19 induced movement restrictions and measures are directly impacting the daily lives of IDPs [internally displaced persons], refugees and host communities, especially in countries where many people rely on remittances," the IOM said in a statement. "IOM is seeking approximately US\$87 million to support vital response and recovery activities in the East and Horn of Africa."

IOM said the requested money will help the organization provide equitable access to coronavirus vaccines for migrants and refugees who are at risk to be left out from inoculation programs.

In addition, the funds will ensure that health and other services are continued and scaled up for communities hosting displaced populations in the region, which has also been plagued by protracted conflict.

The money will also be used to improve the conditions for migrants living in overcrowded areas and help to mitigate the long-term effects of the pandemic.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Reference to Putin as Killer Blurted Out, Words 'Put in His Mouth' - Ex-US Official

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's statement describing Russian President Vladimir Putin as a killer was made carelessly and represents a manipulation on the part of the interviewer, former US Ambassador to Russia and Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun said on Friday.

Biden set off a diplomatic firestorm after answering in the affirmative when asked whether he considered Putin to be a killer during an interview with ABC News last month.

"I do think that the reference to Putin as a killer was a word, something that President Biden simply blurted out. And frankly the words were put in his mouth by the interviewer and he went with it," Biegun said during an event hosted by the Aspen Institute.

In hindsight, Biden's advisors would have encouraged him not to make such statements and the subsequent messaging has been an attempt at damage control, while attempting to "make a virtue out of misstatements," Biegun added.

The comments, as well as a myriad of US sanctions that followed, prompted Russia to recall Ambassador Anatoly Antonov to Moscow for consultations.

Earlier this month, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told Sputnik that Antonov will most likely not return to Washington in the near future and the solution to this issue depends on the willingness of the United States to show at least some desire to normalize relations with Russia.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Ukrainian Nazis Look Well Organized, People Forget History Lessons – US WWII Veteran

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) – Ukrainian nationalists look well organized, they do not learn from history, as Nazi supporters around the world, US veteran of World War II and Holocaust survivor Frank Kohn told Sputnik on Friday.

On Wednesday, Ukrainian nationalists held the first march in the center of Kiev to commemorate the anniversary of the foundation of the SS Galicia Division during World War II. Previously, such parades were held in the city of Lviv.

"Unfortunately there are Nazi type groups in all of our democracies, we have them here in the United States. It seems that the Ukrainian Nazis seem to be larger in size and better organized," the veteran said.

Cohn, who was born to a Jewish family in Germany in 1925 and had to flee to the US in 1938, called this situation "frightening," adding that "so many people in this world are forgetting history lessons."

He called for vigilance, saying such groups jump into action when they find opportunities to overthrow governments.

"If they gain power, like they might in the Ukraine, do you think that the other nations will get themselves involved beyond some ineffective sanctions? No way! Then we can only hope they don't have another Hitler who wants to capture the world," said veteran, who participated in the meeting between US and Soviet troops at the Elbe River in Germany in April 1945 and the liberation of the Soviet labor camp in Wiesbaden.

Cohn, now 95, expressed confidence that such tragic prospects will not recur in his lifetime.

"It is up to the younger generations to figure out what to do about it. My generation finally went to war, but it was like pulling teeth," he said.

The SS Division Galicia — a military unit that included more than 80,000 volunteers from the Ukrainian region of Galicia — was established on April 28, 1943, to oppose the Soviet Union, which had begun to make major advances against Nazi Germany and its allies in the Great Patriotic War (the 1941-1945 segment of World War 2). The division's ranks committed numerous atrocities in the territory of the Soviet Union and Poland.

The division existed until mid-1944, when it suffered heavy losses in the Battle of Brody during a major Red Army offensive aimed at expelling the Nazi forces from Ukraine and eastern Poland.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Over 120 Minors, Including 114 Unaccompanied Children, Rescued at Sea Near Libya - UNICEF

UNITED NATIONS, April 30 (Sputnik) - A total of 125 children, including 114 unaccompanied children, were rescued this week in the Central Mediterranean migration route off the coast of Libya, UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said in a statement on Friday.

"This week, 125 children, including 114 unaccompanied children, were rescued at sea, off the coast of Libya," the statement said.

UNICEF said this year, at least 350 people have already drowned or gone missing in the Central Mediterranean, which is considered one of the deadliest migration routes in the world. Some 130 migrants have died while trying to reach Europe just last week.

According to the UN agency, migrants who get rescued at sea are sent to overcrowded detention facilities in Libya with no or limited access to health services. Nearly 1,100 children are currently in these centers.

UNICEF urged Libya to release all children and end detention and called on the European authorities on the Central Mediterranean to receive migrants and strengthen search and rescue mechanisms.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Lists China, India, Russia, Ukraine For Intellectual Property Theft Concerns - Report

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The US government has listed China, India, Saudi Arabia, Ukraine, Indonesia and Argentina along with Russia as among its "most significant concerns" for intellectual property (IP) theft, according to the 2021 Report of the Special Trade Representative (STR) published on Friday.

"Nine countries - Argentina, Chile, China, India, Indonesia, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Ukraine, and Venezuela - are on the Priority Watch List," the report said. "These countries will be the subject of particularly intense bilateral engagement during the coming year."

Another 23 nations identified as trading partners of the United States are also on the Watch List, and merit bilateral attention to address underlying IP problems, the STR report said.

It listed "Algeria, Barbados, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Guatemala, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mexico, Pakistan, Paraguay, Peru, Romania, Thailand, Trinidad & Tobago, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam," in that category.

Trading partners on the Priority Watch List present the most significant concerns regarding insufficient IP protection or enforcement or actions that otherwise limited market access for persons relying on intellectual property protection, the report noted.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Still Concerned About European Union's 'Aggressive' Trade Policies - Report

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The US government continues to express "concerns" about aggressive exclusionary trade policies pursued by the 27-nation European Union (EU), according to the 2021 Report of the Special Trade Representative (STR) published on Friday. "Concerns with the European Union's aggressive promotion of its exclusionary geographical indications policies persist," the report said.

The United States continues to pursue intensive engagement with the EU on the issue, the report noted.

Washington seeks to promote and protect access to foreign markets for US exporters of products that were identified by common names or otherwise marketed under previously registered trademarks, the STR added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Takes UAE Off Intellectual Property Concerns Watch List - Report

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The US government has removed the United Arab Emirates (UAE) from its Watch List for concerns about Intellectual Property (IP) rights theft and abuse, the 2021 Report of the Special Trade Representative (STR) said on Friday.

"The United Arab Emirates is removed from the Watch List this year due to the Ministry of Health and Prevention resolving concerns with IP protection of pharmaceutical products," the report stated.

The report also praised the UAE for strengthening its standards on upholding laws on enforcing rights in the area.

"The UAE also made progress on longstanding IP enforcement concerns," it said.

Neighboring Saudi Arabia was placed on the Priority Watch List in 2019 for failing to take action against rampant satellite and online piracy and continued lack of effective protection of intellectual property (IP) for pharmaceutical products. At the same time, the Saudis took action to take steps to improve IP protection and enforcement in 2020, the report said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Canadian Economy Grows by 0.4% in February, Still 2% off Pre-Pandemic Levels – StatCan

TORONTO, April 30 (Sputnik) – The Canadian economy grew by 0.4 percent in February but remains 2 percent below pre-pandemic levels, the state statistics agency said on Friday. “Real gross domestic product (GDP) grew 0.4% in February, following 0.7% growth in January,” Statistics Canada said in its monthly economic report. “However, total economic activity was about 2% below the level observed in February 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic.” The slim rise in economic activity was spurred by increased retail trade, with businesses re-opening following the peak of the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic in January. Goods-producing industries saw a decline of 0.2 percent – the first since April 2020, the report said. Overall, 14 of the 20 industrial sectors reported economic growth in February. Canada expects its GDP and employment levels to reach pre-pandemic levels at some point during 2021, according to the federal budget delivered last week.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

RPT: ANALYSIS - Biden Likely Sowed Seeds for Economic Crisis Amid 100-Day Boom

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden while riding a wave of explosive economic growth in his first 100 days in office may have laid landmines that could send inflation skyrocketing and reduce productivity, analysts told Sputnik.

Biden reached the much-hyped 100-days-in-office landmark on Thursday, a period of heightened performance scrutiny that began with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who enacted 76 laws during this symbolic period.

LANDMINES

The economy has heated up under Biden but many economists have worried about inflation. US GDP expanded by 6.4 percent in the first quarter after a surge in consumer spending, the Commerce Department said on Thursday. The economy is also projected to grow by 6.6% in 2021 after shrinking by 3.5 percent last year due to pandemic lockdowns.

The US stock market, meanwhile, is on pace for its best start under a new president since 1945, according to Barron's. Both the S&P 500 and Dow Jones indices are up nearly 9 percent since inauguration day and hit record highs on April 26. During Trump's first 100 days the same indices both grew by around 6%.

Earlier in April, however, the US central bank said the federal debt, which now stands at an all-time high of more than \$27 trillion, was unsustainable over the long term. Moreover, US consumer prices, the key gauge for inflation, rose 0.6 percent in March for its highest growth in nearly a decade.

"[Biden] throwing money around... re-imposition of regulations and continuation of funny money means productivity will crater," former international merchant banker Martin Hutchinson told Sputnik.

Hutchinson, author of "Alchemists of Loss: How modern finance and government intervention crashed the financial system," also said Biden's economic policies are considerably worse than Trump's and more "left-wing" than he had expected.

He even suggested the United States could see inflation rise to higher levels than the 1970s, when the average rate was 6.8 percent.

In March, Biden signed a \$1.9 trillion stimulus package into law to jump-start the economy. During his first address to Congress on Thursday, the president unveiled a plan to invest another \$2 trillion in jobs, infrastructure and education.

Center for Peace & Freedom, Independent Institute Ivan Eland believes Biden may even turn out worse than Trump in adding to the US deficits and debt.

The president's new spending plans, Eland argued, are unnecessary given the Congressional Budget Office is forecasting 3.6% growth.

"Biden's pork-laden COVID relief bill is unneeded [and] could cause inflation in a roaring post-pandemic economy," Eland warned.

NO RESISTANCE

Because the Democrats in the 2020 election swept control of the White House and both chambers of Congress, the Republicans will be hard-pressed to prevent Biden from passing many policies.

On Wednesday, Republicans pushed back against Biden's infrastructure blueprint and have recently put forth a \$568 billion plan of their own.

"Maybe he [Biden] will compromise with the Republicans, hopefully somewhere closer to the lower Republican number," Eland said.

Hutchinson argued that the economic recovery was on the right track under Trump and will probably now stall due to Biden's radical solutions.

The former merchant banker, however, believes that some of the president's bills will get blocked in Congress.

Biden's Gallup favorability rating of 57% is 16 points higher than where Trump's was at this point in 2017. President John F. Kennedy's 83% is the highest 100-day approval rating recorded by Gallup, which began tracking the measure in the 1950s.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Mediators to Take Part in Israel-Lebanon Maritime Boundary Talks Next Week - State Dept

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The US team in charge of mediating the discussions between Israel and Lebanon on maritime borders will head to Lebanon on Monday to participate in the talks starting Tuesday, the State Department announced in a release.

"The U.S. team mediating the Israel-Lebanon Maritime Boundary negotiations, led by Ambassador John P. Desrocher, will travel to Lebanon on May 3," the statement said. "The U.S. team will mediate talks between representatives from the governments of Israel and Lebanon on the disputed maritime boundary, beginning May 4."

The Department also called the resumption of negotiations “a positive step towards a long-awaited resolution.”

Earlier in April, Lebanese President Michel Aoun stressed the importance to continue talks with Israel over the bilateral maritime dispute and called for approving foreign experts to help demarcate the sea border in line with international law.

Also in April, US Under Secretary for Political Affairs David Hale said, following talks with Aoun, that Washington stands ready to facilitate maritime negotiations between Israel and Lebanon. In October of last year, Lebanon and Israel entered US-mediated indirect talks on the demarcation of maritime borders. The negotiations hit a deadlock after Beirut sought to expand claims to an additional 1,430 square kilometers on top of the already disputed 860 square kilometers of the potentially gas-rich area.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blinken to Meet Zelenskyy During Visit to Ukraine on May 5-6 – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will meet Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during his upcoming trip to Kiev next week, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement on Friday.

“The Secretary will ... travel to Kyiv, Ukraine, May 5-6, where he will meet with President Zelenskyy, Foreign Minister [Dmytro] Kuleba, other officials, and representatives of Ukrainian civil society to reaffirm unwavering U.S. support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russia’s ongoing aggression,” Price said.

Blinken plans to encourage continued progress on Ukraine’s institutional reform agenda, particularly anti-corruption action, Price added.

Prior the voyage to Ukraine, Blinken will attend the G7 Foreign and Development Ministers’ Meeting in London on May 3-5.

“The United States will discuss how we can work with other countries to address the key geopolitical issues we face as we build back better from this pandemic,” Price noted, adding that Washington considering G7 as a crucial platform for maintaining the global economy and international security.

COVID-19, climate change, economic growth, human rights, food security will be on the top of discussions, he added.

In the UK, Blinken will meet with Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab to discuss bilateral priorities and cooperation. He will also take part in a wreath-laying ceremony in London in remembrance of the country’s fallen in World War II, the statement read.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blinken to Meet Zelenskyy During Visit to Ukraine on May 5-6 – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will meet Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during his upcoming trip to Kiev next week, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement on Friday.

"The Secretary will ... travel to Kyiv, Ukraine, May 5-6, where he will meet with President Zelenskyy, Foreign Minister [Dmytro] Kuleba, other officials, and representatives of Ukrainian civil society to reaffirm unwavering U.S. support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russia's ongoing aggression," Price said.

Blinken plans to encourage continued progress on Ukraine's institutional reform agenda, particularly anti-corruption action, Price added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

ANALYSIS - Biden Likely Sowed Seeds for Economic Crisis Amid 100-Day Boom

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden while riding a wave of explosive economic growth in his first 100 days in office may have laid landmines that could send inflation skyrocketing and reduce productivity, analysts told Sputnik.

Biden reached the much-hyped 100-days-in-office landmark on Thursday, a period of heightened performance scrutiny that began with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who enacted 76 laws during this symbolic period.

LANDMINES

The economy has heated up under Biden but many economists have worried about inflation. US GDP expanded by 6.4 percent in the first quarter after a surge in consumer spending, the Commerce Department said on Thursday. The economy is also projected to grow by 6.6% in 2021 after shrinking by 3.5 percent last year due to pandemic lockdowns.

The US stock market, meanwhile, is on pace for its best start under a new president since 1945, according to Barron's. Both the S&P 500 and Dow Jones indices are up nearly 9 percent since inauguration day and hit record highs on April 26. During Trump's first 100 days the same indices both grew by around 6%.

Earlier in April, however, the US central bank said the federal debt, which now stands at an all-time high of more than \$27 trillion, was unsustainable over the long term. Moreover, US consumer prices, the key gauge for inflation, rose 0.6 percent in March for its highest growth in nearly a decade.

"[Biden] throwing money around... re-imposition of regulations and continuation of funny money means productivity will crater," former international merchant banker Martin Hutchinson told Sputnik.

Hutchinson, author of "Alchemists of Loss: How modern finance and government intervention crashed the financial system," also said Biden's economic policies are considerably worse than Trump's and more "left-wing" than he had expected.

He even suggested the United States could see inflation rise to higher levels than the 1970s, when the average rate was 6.8 percent.

In March, Biden signed a \$1.9 trillion stimulus package into law to jump-start the economy. During his first address to Congress on Thursday, the president unveiled a plan to invest another \$2 trillion in jobs, infrastructure and education.

Center for Peace & Freedom, Independent Institute Ivan Eland believes Biden may even turn out worse than Trump in adding to the US deficits and debt.

The president's new spending plans, Eland argued, are unnecessary given the Congressional Budget Office is forecasting 3.6% growth.

"Biden's pork-laden COVID relief bill is unneeded [and] could cause inflation in a roaring post-pandemic economy," Eland warned.

NO RESISTANCE

Because the Democrats in the 2020 election swept control of the White House and both chambers of Congress, the Republicans will be hard-pressed to prevent Biden from passing many policies.

On Wednesday, Republicans pushed back against Biden's infrastructure blueprint and have recently put forth a \$568 billion plan of their own.

"Maybe he [Biden] will compromise with the Republicans, hopefully somewhere closer to the lower Republican number," Eland said.

Hutchinson argued that the economic recovery was on the right track under Trump and will probably now stall due to Biden's radical solutions.

The former merchant banker, however, believes that some of the president's bills will get blocked in Congress.

Biden's Gallup favorability rating of 57% is 16 points higher than where Trump's was at this point in 2017. President John F. Kennedy's 83% is the highest 100-day approval rating recorded by Gallup, which began tracking the measure in the 1950s.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

RPT - US WWII Veterans Hope to Visit Russia Again Once Travel Restrictions Lifted - Foundation

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - US World War II veterans hope to visit Russia again when the travel restrictions imposed due to the coronavirus pandemic are removed, president and CEO of The Greatest GENERATIONS Foundation Timothy Davis told Sputnik.

"What a difficult time for the world, more importantly, our esteemed World War II veterans," Davis said. "We still have high expectations of returning to Russia - once COVID-19 is over and cleared to travel."

Last year, twelve World War II veterans from the United States were scheduled travel to Russia in May to celebrate the anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War in Moscow as well as visit St. Petersburg and Volgograd.

The trip, sponsored by the foundation, was canceled due to the measures the various authorities undertook to mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Ahead of the upcoming 76th anniversary of Victory Day on May 9, Davis shared with Sputnik that the majority of the US veterans are doing well and prepared to travel.

"Most of our veterans are doing great, vaccinated, and are ready for the next mission with me," he said. "As another year has gone by, time is against us, and we all hope and pray we can help the last living heroes of World War II before it is too late."

Davis said they believe the foundation can continue its programs serving World War II veterans through 2025 - the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II.

The Greatest GENERATIONS Foundation is a charitable organization and is not part of the US federal government. The foundation operates more than 30 chapters across North America and exists because of the generosity of individuals and various organizations that are supportive of its mission.